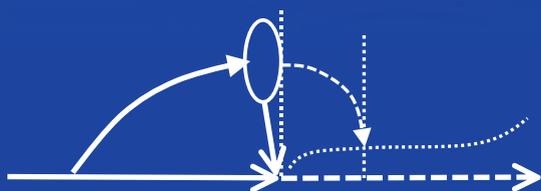


Brady Wagoner  
Bo Allesøe Christensen  
Carolyn Demuth  
*Editors*

# Culture as Process

A Tribute to Jaan Valsiner



 Springer

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# Foreword

## Jaan Valsiner, A Quest for the Whole

Characterizing Jaan Valsiner's academic endeavor as a quest for the whole, may at first glance seem a bit too easy, casual, or even trifled. For is such characterization not reached by merely combining phrases from the titles of some of Jaan's co-authored works, more exactly from *Striving for the whole* (Diriwächter & Valsiner, 2008) and *A quest for synthesis*" (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991)? But, nonetheless, we actually think this kind of bricolage captures the essence of Jaan's pursuit, not only as a researcher, but also as a colleague and – not least – as a human being. As several testimonials in this book attest, Jaan has adamantly pursued the *whole* for the last many years.

There is really nothing easy or superficial about *quests*. As a matter of fact, the quest is one of the seminal motives in world literature as well as in modern fiction (e.g., computer games). *La queste* is at the heart of the Arthurian epos, most notably in Chrétien de Troyes' unfinished *Perceval ou le Conte de Graal* (ca. 1180\_1190) and the anonymous *Les aventures ou la queste del Saint Graal* (Busby, 1993; Sommer, 1913). But this motive is older and much more widespread than medieval France. The adventures of Ulysses in Homer's *Odyseus*, the longings of Vergil's Aeneas for a place to call his own, Jason and his Argonauts searching for the Golden Fleece, but also the *Bildungsroman* (e.g., Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*) and the tale of Beren and Lúthien (Tolkien, 1977), these are all captivating stories of quests addressing some deep strata in the human mind, while revealing the protagonist's personality, morals, successes, and perils.

A quest is a striving, and synthesis aims for the whole. These phrases replicate one another, but being used almost 20 years apart, they also indicate continuities in Jaan's academic career. It has been and still is a quest. Every quest has an object, and this object – the Grail – is precious but hard to obtain. It is either hidden or has been lost, or can, at its worst, even be unobtainable. The "Whole" is such an object. Jaan's two books, that we have alluded to, are precursors in this quest. And this points to one important feature of Jaan's own project or quest if you will: his

insistence on the value of tradition and his instruction to recognize and respect this value by studying, emulating, and elaborating on it. This demand may seem curiously at odds with present standard practices in academia with its tendency to treat older contributions as obsolete and outdated. But is not striving for synthesis in itself at odds with the academic urge to specialize? Narrowing your field of research may further your career, but it also contributes to fragmenting the field into innumerable sub-fields, apparently unrelated to one another.

Cultural psychology, the vessel of Jaan's quest, is instrumental in repairing what has been splintered and re-discovering what has been lost – the whole. Cultural psychology is not yet another sub-field of psychology, related to, for example, developmental psychology (as a sub-discipline) or to cross-cultural psychology. Instead, it is a significant, rather radical broadening of the field, well beyond the confines of modern psychology. Because Jaan is also insistent when it comes to integrating psychology with other disciplines: with anthropology, sociology, linguistics, semiotics, history, philosophy, you name it. The aim of cultural psychology is radical. It is to understand the condition of human existence in its totality. In that sense the quest is a search for the meaning of the whole.

Going against the grain of mainstream psychology is hazardous. In addition to being difficult, quests are also dangerous. They are full of obstacles, of dragons, sirens, and other hideous monsters. It takes courage, will, and enormous intelligence – and perhaps also a dose of luck – to avoid these trappings. It also takes the help of others: of fellow travelers, fellow searchers, and researchers. Quests are always prolonged, going on for years, decades, forever. And they may lead the hero to unforeseen places in faraway lands. Jaan and his ideas have travelled the world during this long search, and along the road he has found many scholars willing to follow him on his journey. This journey has become a collective enterprise, which is evident when reading the contributions in this volume. It is an endeavor, shared by a group of colleagues that have turned into a group of friends. Actually, the most apt designation for this group might probably be that of a globally extended family, united not at some court's mythical Round Table but at one of the most familiar, humble but nonetheless affective places of all: i.e., in the "kitchen," collectively sharing, probing, and developing ideas – operating as a tightly knit unit, a whole.

It is not only because of his eminent scholarship nor by some unusual oratorical skills that Jaan has been able to assemble this "family." It is very much due to his personality. Jaan is as curious about ideas as he is about people. About the perspectives, opinions, and experiences of others. And he is interested in developing and propagating the ideas of others, not less than his own ones. He invites ideas and encourages curiosity, and while doing so he invites the bearers of these ideas into his world. To many of us, he may serve as a mentor, but he has also – and more importantly – become a friend and thereby he has made us part of his extended family.

In 2013 it was our good fortune that the vessel of Cultural Psychology – probably quite unforeseen by Jaan himself – landed in Denmark, at Aalborg University. Jaan went ashore, and with him a constant flow of fellow cultural psychologists from near and afar followed. Since then, we have benefited tremendously from Jaan's preoccupation with "the whole." It has given us a much broader outlook. It has

increased our productivity and strengthened our international reputation. Most significantly for us, though, Jaan's arrival has given us a friend and made us part of his "family." For those fortunate enough to be part of the family, most have experienced Jaan's hospitality, curiosity, and mild-mannered persistent side. His hospitality is well known – from his travels he brings gifts and things he believes others will enjoy or find as amusing as he does. But Jaan also expects much from his family, but that is only because of his genuine interest in others. As such family members have even found themselves the objects of his articles and books; this is where one tends to rely on his own sentiment, that he is "not that kind of psychologist."

While the hero of most quests relies on strength, strong morals, and intelligence, many heroes also rely on luck and on trusting other people. We will not be the judges of whether Jaan has been lucky or not, but we can certainly testify that his trust in others is immense. As an avid believer in the potential of others, Jaan will do his utmost to help promote and develop these capacities. This is probably one of the finest sides of any research leader.

A quest is a noble endeavor. The word quest is derived from medieval French *la quête*, itself derived from the Latin verb *quaerere*, meaning to ask (cf. question) or to search. A quest is thus at the core of research understood as a persistent search by perpetually asking questions, whose definite answers might very likely be indefinitely postponed. The aim of academia is not to find unequivocal answers or clear solutions, but rather to embark on difficult, sometimes dangerous and always prolonged searches for a precious object and to undertake such journeys not for the sake of the (re)searcher but for humanity as a whole. Jaan Valsiner's greatest contribution to academia during his long and impressive career is therefore to show us what conducting academic life might otherwise make us forget: the nobility of the quest and its goal. In Jaan's case this goal is "the whole," not only in a theoretical but first and foremost in a profoundly human sense.

Aalborg, Denmark

Christian Jantzen  
Mikael Vetner

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# Contents

<b>The Mind of a Persistent Innovator</b> . . . . .	1
Brady Wagoner, Carolin Demuth, and Bo A. Christensen	
<b>Part I Reimagining the History of Psychology</b>	
<b>Jaan Valsiner: A Ganzheitspsychologist?</b> . . . . .	19
Rainer Diriwächter	
<b>Rising up to Humanity: Towards a Cultural Psychology of <i>Bildung</i></b> . . . . .	29
Svend Brinkmann	
<b>The Self Inside of Us: Biologism, Internalization, Quantification, and Science</b> . . . . .	37
Martin Dege	
<b>Valsiner and Van der Veer: A Case of Intellectual Interdependency</b> . . . . .	49
Rene van der Veer	
<b>Part II Developmental Science in the Making</b>	
<b>The Dynamics of Agency and Context in Human Development: Holism Revisited</b> . . . . .	57
Nancy Budwig	
<b>The Trajectory of Jaan Valsiner's Thought</b> . . . . .	71
James V. Wertsch	
<b>Forever Feeding Forward</b> . . . . .	77
Tania Zittoun	
<b>Cultural Processes from the Inside: What Happens During and After a Movement?</b> . . . . .	87
Boulanger Dany	

<b><i>The Bounded Indeterminacy of Tradition</i></b> .....	105
Lívia Mathias Simão	
<b>Part III The Semiotic Mind</b>	
<b>A Stroll Through the Birthplace of Signs</b> .....	117
Carlos Cornejo	
<b>Expansive and Restrictive Semiosis: Exploring the Process of Cultural Guidance</b> .....	133
Alex Gillespie	
<b>Hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields: The Generative Power of a Construct</b> .....	143
Angela Uchoa Branco	
<b>Unfolding Semiotics: The Field of Mediated Activity</b> .....	153
Marie-Cécile Bertau	
<b>Interpersonal Psychoanalysis as a Culturally Unique Field: A Semiotic Analysis</b> .....	169
Philip J. Rosenbaum	
<b>Part IV Cultural Transmission and Transformation</b>	
<b>Culture as a Creative Process</b> .....	185
Vlad P. Glăveanu	
<b>The Carnavalesque Pedagogy: Jaan as a Pedagogue</b> .....	193
Kyoko Murakami	
<b>Overcoming the Binary Logic in Biculturalism</b> .....	201
Elke Murdock	
<b>The Sense of Belonging in the Context of Migration: Meanings and Developmental Trajectories</b> .....	211
Isabelle Albert and Stephanie Barros	
<b>Political Plasticity and Culture</b> .....	223
Fathali M. Moghaddam	
<b>Part V Aesthetics in Culture and Mind</b>	
<b>Aesthetic Notes on Ornamented Lives</b> .....	233
Robert E. Innis	
<b>Pleromatization: Bringing Cultural Psychology Closer to Human Experience</b> .....	243
Sven Hroar Klempe and Olga Lehmann	

<b>The <i>Vorbild</i> in Donor Portraits and Cultural Psychology</b> .....	251
Lucas B. Mazur	
<b>Intimacy in Irreversible Time: Poetic Genesis as a Special Case of Boundary Dynamics</b> .....	261
Emily Abbey and Ana Cecília Bastos	
<b>The Fabric of (Faked) Behavior Shows in Theatre Rehearsals: An Exploration on How Body Movements Turn into Signs for Experiencing</b> .....	273
Alberto Rosa	
<b>Part VI Psychology as a Global Science</b>	
<b>Local Ideas for a Global Science: The Journey from Indian Psychology to Cultural Psychology</b> .....	287
Nandita Chaudhary	
<b>The Collective Making of a General Psychology of Culture</b> .....	303
Jakob W. Villadsen and Pernille Hviid	
<b>The Relationalism of Jaan Valsiner</b> .....	315
Danilo Silva Guimarães	
<b>Jaan Valsiner, a Keen Perceiver and Creator of Cultural Ecology</b> .....	327
Shuangshuang Xu, Aruna Wu, and Xiaowen Li	
<b>Part VII Epistemological Foundations of Psychology</b>	
<b>The Science of Psyche: Jaan Valsiner's Way at the Frontiers</b> .....	339
Aaro Toomela	
<b>Ideas and Challenges for Cultural Psychology</b> .....	355
Sergio Salvatore	
<b>Action-Theoretical Cultural Psychology and the Decentred Subject</b> ....	363
Jürgen Straub	
<b>Valsiner on Facts: Making Culture Explicit?</b> .....	379
Bo A. Christensen	
<b>Bridging: Some Personal Reflections</b> .....	389
Jens Mammen	
<b>Part VIII Innovating Methodology</b>	
<b>Developing Dynamic Methodologies: Jaan Valsiner's Influence on the Methodological Thinking in Cultural Psychology and Beyond</b> .....	401
Mariann Märtsin	

**Catalysis in Cultural Psychology: Its Past and Future** . . . . . 409  
Zachary Beckstead

**The Catalytic Powers of Psychoanalytic Thought Models** . . . . . 419  
Erik Stänicke and Tobias G. Lindstad

**From “I-AM” to “WE-AM” Predicates:  
Considering Self-Reflexivity Through a Collective “I”** . . . . . 429  
Kevin R. Carriere

**Jaan Valsiner in Japan: The Trajectory  
Equifinality Approach (TEA)**. . . . . 443  
Tatsuya Sato, Teppei Tsuchimoto, Yuko Yasuda, and Aya Kido

**Part IX Concluding Comment**

**My Confession** . . . . . 457  
Jaan Valsiner

**Index**. . . . . 463

# The Mind of a Persistent Innovator



Brady Wagoner, Carolin Demuth, and Bo A. Christensen

Jaan Valsiner (2010) once described developmental theorist James Mark Baldwin as “a persistent innovator,” a motto that can equally be applied to himself. In Jaan’s publications, lectures, and discussions with students and colleagues, he has always emphasized the need to push ideas forward beyond what has already been established. Building on an impressive depth and breadth of ideas, his writings are attempts to chart a new course for psychology, bringing novel theoretical and methodological approaches into the discipline. Unlike most academics, Jaan does not repeat his lectures (despite giving many) but pushes himself to add something new each time. He also often gives spontaneous and improvised lectures – a skill he learned as a young lecturer in Estonia (Valsiner, this volume). His pedagogical style has a carnivalesque quality that encourages breaking down formal hierarchies and playing with ideas (Murakami, this volume). At the same time, the young students he supervises experience someone who takes their ideas seriously as producers rather than simply consumers of knowledge (the first author owes his early formation to Jaan’s guidance according to this principle). He frequently highlights that innovations in science come from the young, which he actively promotes with his persistent question of what is new in the research under discussion and what can we do to take it forward.

Science for Jaan is not about amassing large quantities of data but making conceptual breakthroughs. For this we don’t need more data, but more carefully selected and constructed data – in other words, data that is theoretically targeted and leads to reflection on and generalization to broader issues (see, e.g., Valsiner, 2015). Without a solid theoretical and methodological basis to guide its activities, psychology will flounder. To build such foundations, Jaan has read deeply and widely in the history of ideas.

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Against a historically myopic discipline that emphasizes citing (empirical) papers only from the last few years (with the assumption that there is a linear accumulation of knowledge, as if research studies were building blocks put on top of one another), Jaan has half joked that he increasingly reads works further back in time (now centuries ago) and in disciplines outside psychology (such as aesthetics) to better understand psychological phenomena. Yet while respecting the intellectual struggles of earlier thinkers, he ultimately highlights where they failed and where we need to pick up from. Science does not advance through hero worship or ideological positioning as, for example, being a “Vygotskian” vs. “Piagetian” – a false intellectual opposition though an academically prevalent one today (Duveen, 1997; Valsiner, 1996).

This book is organized to thematize different sides of Jaan’s wide ranging *oeuvre*. Jaan has made seminal contributions to the history of psychology (Part I), developmental science (Part II), semiotics (Part III), cultural dynamics (Part IV), aesthetics (Part V), globalizing the discipline of psychology (Part VI), epistemology (Part VII), and methodology (Part VIII) for psychology. Long-standing collaborators, former students, and colleagues, spanning several decades, were asked to write contributions in relation to Jaan’s work. Although there is a personal touch to many contributions, the emphasis is on explicating and pushing forward his ideas in the different domains mentioned above. In what follows, we will outline Jaan’s approach to each of these domains to set the frame for the contributions to these different sections of the book. Thus, instead of trying to sum up Jaan’s wide-ranging and complex *oeuvre* within a few paragraphs, we instead approach it from different sides and perspectives, highlighting some of the key ideas he has brought to the discipline in relation to the eight parts of the book.

## 1 Part I. Reimagining the History of Psychology

Jaan has been a key explorer and contributor to the critical history of psychology. His way of doing history aims to reconstruct ideas from the past within their social-historical milieu, with the ultimate aim of using them to innovate the future of the discipline. Many ideas were left behind for entirely unscientific reasons and require an active effort to reintegrate them into the discipline (Toomela, 2007; Toomela & Valsiner, 2010). In other cases, past thinkers are often reduced to simple formulations, such as “Vygotsky says the mind is social,” without working out what precisely these overgeneralized statements mean (see Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). A critical history involves tracing ideas from their origin in a particular societal context with its specific value and belief systems. Approaching ideas in this way, we can see both their limitations and the possibilities of developing them further today. This is similar to Gadamer’s (1975/2005) idea that interpreting the past involves applying it in the present. Jaan’s major work in this area began with a book on *Developmental Psychology in the Soviet Union* (Valsiner, 1988). At around the same time, he began working with van der Veer with whom he would go on to publish a number of major works, including *Understanding Vygotsky: A Quest for Synthesis* and *The Social Mind: Construction of the Idea* (see van der Veer, this

volume). In his later book *A Guided Science: Psychology in the Mirror of its Making* (Valsiner, 2012), he begins to extend his historical look further back in time to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, particularly with regard to German holistic philosophy. This period of time also saw a flourishing of romantic nature paintings (e.g., by Caspar David Friedrich and Carl Gustav Carus) which Jaan has been increasingly interested in exploring for their psychological insights. The chapters of this section avoid the traditional “whig” history of psychology and instead focus on older philosophical and societal forces that have molded the way that we understand and approach the mind today (see esp. Dege, this volume), as well as concepts from the past that have yet to be fully incorporated into our present thinking, such as the notion of *Bildung* (Brinkman, this volume) and Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie (Diriwächter, this volume).

## 2 Part II. Developmental Science in the Making

When recently asked what he saw as his main contributions to psychology (Valsiner et al., [in prep.](#)), Jaan responded that it was his bringing in the notion of “irreversible time” (a consistently developmental orientation) and hypergeneralization (which he explains with semiotic models). This section outlines his developmental approach, and the next will describe his incorporation of semiotics into a science of mind. After immigrating to the USA, Jaan’s early work dealt with mother-child interactions. In his *Development of Children’s Action*, he includes a chapter on children’s feeding time that presents a theoretical frame for approaching these seemingly mundane interactions (see also Wertsch, this volume). Through his careful study of Baldwin, Vygotsky, Werner, and others, Jaan became increasingly interested in the meaning of development and dissatisfied with how it is understood in psychology.

He sees the main shortcoming of developmental psychology in its failure to understand the irreversibility of time and consequently to explain processes of transformation: Human development always implies temporality. A truly developmental perspective entails investigation of *general laws* of emergence of *novelty* in *irreversible time* (Valsiner, 1993, 1994, 2000). Development processes entail the emergence of *novel forms of qualitatively new character* (Valsiner, 1993). Novelty is detectable by comparing what has already emerged (past) with what is currently emerging – as the past becomes a new past (currently future). Two aspects of time come into play here: *personal experience* and *generalized abstraction* (Valsiner, 1993). To pursue such a perspective, he draws on Bergson’s (1907) notion of “duration” to explain that time “can be experienced only in the form of a person’s interaction with the world in the immediate present – an infinitely small time period that unites the past (which is vanishing) and future (which is approaching)”. In other words: “life involves unstoppable movement towards constructing a future that instantly [...] becomes past” (Valsiner 1993, p. 21). He quotes Baldwin’s (1906, p. 21) “second postulate” of developmental science: “...that series of events only is truly genetic which cannot be constructed before it has happened, and which cannot be exhausted by reading backwards after it has happened” (Valsiner, 1993, p. 25).

A truly developmental science therefore needs to take into account processes of transformation in irreversible time (see also Part IV of this volume). As he states: "... if we are interested in explaining how development takes place, then we need to create conceptual vehicles that would capture the *process of transformation* in the life course of organisms" (Valsiner, 1993, p. 17, author's emphasis). This requires an analysis of qualitative transformations and the emergence of novelty in single cases. Most developmental psychology is, however, stuck in describing static outcome states through aggregates of individuals (Valsiner, 1993). It is based on "measuring" specific cognitive capacities and behavioral patterns at different stages across the life span. Most of developmental psychology is hence in fact based on non-developmental premises and fails to explain psychological developmental outcomes through understanding of the process mechanisms that lead to these outcomes (see also Budwig, this volume). It misses the systemic organization of psychological functioning and a view to the emergence of novelty in development. Human development is a dynamic progress of real living beings who are in a constant state of becoming within the flux of irreversible time. Rather than a science of predicting outcomes, developmental psychology should therefore be focused on understanding the *processes* of development which are by definition not fully predictable (Valsiner, 2000).

A central premise in Jaan's work is that human psychological development is *culturally guided* and *personally constructed* (Valsiner, 2000; see also Zittoun, this volume). This implies that the social environment (other persons, social institutions, ideological systems), which has historically evolved within a given society, can set up directions but cannot determine a person's development. The actual course of personal development is constructed by the person in relation to that guidance (Simão, this volume). In this sense, human psychological development is jointly constructed by persons and their social world in the dynamic flow of irreversible time. Because the future is indeterminate, and out of a need for adaptation within a constantly changing environment, humans use psychological devices to reduce uncertainty: we constantly make meaning of our present experience, based on similarities between past and present experiences as we orient towards and create images of stability for the future. This process of internalizing semiotic means serves to reduce uncertainty (see below). Images of stability are a psychological illusion, however, as they overlook the uniqueness of each lived-through experience and the fact that every new moment in human experiencing is novel (Valsiner, 2000).

To understand the cultural nature of human development, Jaan suggests approaching psychological systems as open systems in which the exchange with the environment takes the form of *constructed signs* (see part III of this book) being *communicated between* the person and his/her environment (Valsiner, 2000). Such an understanding of human development entails that our analysis needs to concentrate on the constant interdependence between the organism and the environment. The open systemic nature of development guarantees that the same developmental process can take place through more than one single route, i.e., the same developmental outcome can be achieved through different routes, a phenomenon that he refers to as *equifinality* (Valsiner, 2000; Valsiner & Sato, 2006; see also Boulanger this volume).

Jaan draws on Werner's 'orthogenetic principle' to define development:

Developmental psychology postulates one regulative principle of development; it is an orthogenetic principle which states that wherever development occurs it proceeds from a state of relative globality and lack of differentiation to a state of increasing differentiation, articulation, and hierarchical integration. (Werner, 1957, p. 126; quoted in Valsiner, 2000, p. xx, emphasis removed)

He particularly stresses the following terms: *Differentiation* is the process of emergence of structure within a previously unstructured field. While differentiating, the emerging (or re-structuring) parts of the whole become *articulated* (take specific forms). *Hierarchical integration* means that developmental phenomena are multilevel constructs, where some levels regulate others. Starting from this definition, he further develops the following two principles: (1) Development is directional, e.g., directed towards a reference point in the future, and (2) hierarchical organization is the basis for flexible (rather than rigid) behavior. Flexibility guarantees plasticity; it also leads to stability. What he sees as missing in this model is an explanation of how the different levels of the hierarchy of the developing system relate one to another. Here, Jaan offers a way to explain the multiplicity of particular courses of development:

Within that general direction each and every individual organism – as long as it develops – produces its own unique trajectory of development. Yet all these unique trajectories observe the general law of development. (Valsiner, 2000, p. xx)

Differences between developmental pathways of children from different societies and within the same society need to be theoretically explainable by the same general theoretical viewpoint, i.e., going beyond the claim that there are cultural differences. The problem of developmental psychology has been the lack of effort to understand such generic similarities – and thus not arriving at generalizable knowledge about development (Valsiner, 2000).

### 3 Part III. The Semiotic Mind

The second key feature of Jaan's approach is semiotic mediation (Valsiner, 2001). The idea is part attributable to Vygotsky who saw all higher mental functions as being mediated by signs (Bertau, this volume). In Vygotsky's famous example, a child reaches for an object that he or she cannot grasp. The adult sees this and fetches the object for the child. Soon the child realizes it can use the gesture to regulate the adult's behavior, at which time the gesture of pointing has become a sign intended for another person rather than an embodied relation to an object. To complete the Vygotskian story, the child might use the pointing gesture to control their own attention, at which point the sign has "reverse action" (Gillespie, this volume). This means that it acts back on its creator to regulate his or her action. This is particularly clear where people create imaginary playmates or gods that give themselves orders (Valsiner, 1999). In short, signs are social in nature, originating in shared experiences with the function of coordinating activities. However, in the

process of being internalized, they are transformed to serve individual ends and thereby personalized (Valsiner, 2014a). Through signs human beings construct meaning in order to act on the world: They are to quote Jaan “compulsive meaning makers.” All animals move, eat, sleep, and procreate, but when humans do these things, they give them specific meanings and proscribe how, where, when, and with what they can be done. In short, we perceive the world and act in all these ways against the background of a complex system of signs.

There are two broad traditions in that have theorized signs: Saussure’s *semiology* and Peirce’s *semiotics* (see Cornejo, this volume). The former was based on studying signs as part of a static and abstract system of *langue*, whereas the latter was developmental and incorporated experiential aspects of signs, especially their felt qualities (a notion going back to *Naturphilosophie*). Although Jaan takes the best from every thinker, his approach fits pretty squarely in the latter camp and as such has overcome some of the limitations of Vygotsky’s reliance of Saussure’s terminology. While spoken language is a crucial tool of semiotic mediation, an understanding of processes needs to go beyond language to address processes of sensing and perceiving (whereas language tends to “entify,” e.g., a specific sensation or a specific perception) (Valsiner, 1993). Peirce (1894) identified three kinds of signs: *index* (that stand to their object by way of causality, like a footprint means someone walked there), *icon* (that stands to its object by way of resemblance, like a photograph of a person), and *symbol* (that stands to its object by way of an arbitrary connection, as one finds in language). Only the last of these would be of note in a Saussurian approach. To illustrate Peirce’s typology of signs, Valsiner (2007, p. 49ff) analyzes how Magritte’s painting “C’est ne pas une pipe” uses *indexes* (smoke coming out of the frame), *icons* (the pipe), and *symbols* (the words) to create ambiguity and reflection. Jaan’s writings and lectures are full of colorful and illustrative examples from advertisements, clothing, buildings, artwork, etc. to explore a diverse range of signs and how they are layered to create novel meanings.

Signs for Jaan emerge out of an affective field of experience to regulate oneself and other signs that have emerged. Thus, a sign hierarchy of increasing generality is constructed. In his later work, Valsiner (2005, 2007, 2020) articulates “four levels” of semiosis to theorize how affect is involved in generalization (Rosenbaum, this volume; Zittoun, this volume): level 0 is an undifferentiated excitation which can become a global feeling at level 1. This may then be described in a label like “sad” at level 2, followed by a more general description of “feeling bad” at level 3. Finally the process may grow into a general feeling without clear borders that is difficult to put into words. To describe level 4, he introduces the notion of “hyper-generalized affective semiotic fields,” which play a special role in guiding human perceptions, thoughts, and feelings (Branco, this volume). It is particularly important when approaching aesthetic phenomena (see Part V below), especially in relation to his concept of pleromatization (see below). The four levels of semiosis build on Werner’s (1957) notion of development (see above) but with a twist: While one sees a process of differentiation from levels 0-2, the process reverses in levels 3-4 such that the highest levels are global in character. In this scheme articulate language thus takes a subordinate to other forms of semiotic mediation.

## 4 Part IV. Cultural Transmission and Transformation

Starting out with an understanding of culture as a process (rather than an entity), the question arises how constructed cultural mediating devices can be “transferred” from one generation to the next (Valsiner, 2003; see also Demuth, 2021)? As Jaan points out, inter-generational transfer is extremely important for continuity of society, “yet simultaneously it has to guarantee constant adaptation of the persons (through their culture) to novel circumstances of life” (Valsiner, 2003, p. 16).

Countering models of cultural transfer that implicitly assume a unidirectional “transmission” common in traditional education, anthropology, and child psychology, Jaan argues from his open systemic approach that novelty is constantly in the process of being created and transfer hence is a bidirectional and co-constructed process. The younger person actively analyzes “messages” from the older person and transforms it into a personally novel form. Cultural transmission hence involves transformation of norms and practices. It is also closely intertwined with the history of a society and “major social institutions which have guided individuals over many generations towards their internalized reconstruction of the value systems, exemplified in specific activity practices (or their avoidances)” (p. 19). From a cultural developmental psychology perspective, the crucial issue is to understand the mechanisms that lead to the fortification or extinction of a presumably established norm. Personal will (including directionality and agency) can here be viewed as a semiotic operator that provides a generic orientation of the self towards the future.

A person can distance him- or herself from any current situation through such cultural (semiotic) means, yet remain part of the setting. This is also reflected in Jaan’s notion of *inclusive separation* (Valsiner, 1998) which Murdock (this volume) applies to discuss cultural transfer in the example of bi-culturalism (see also Albert & Barros, this volume). Moghaddam (this volume) takes up on Jaan’s approach to understand how movement from closed, dictatorial societies to more open, democratic societies can be possible. Overall, the emergence, diffusion, and transformation of culture are ultimately creative processes (Glaveneau, this volume; Wagoner, 2017). Jaan also practices what he preaches by creating the floor for teaching as a co-constructive activity (Murakami, this volume) rather than unidirectionally “transferring” knowledge from teacher to student.

## 5 Part V. Aesthetics in Culture and Mind

A significant part of Jaan’s writings has increasingly focused on analyzing the aesthetic nature of semiotic processes within cultural psychology. Jaan has brought aesthetic aspects forth by analyzing diverse phenomena ranging from paintings to ornaments (Innis, this volume), and others have used his aesthetic thinking for analyzing poetry (Abbey & Bastos, this volume) and theater (Rosa, this volume). As Mazur (this volume) describes it, both the artwork analyzed and the analyzer achieve

an exemplary status in the process. They become a *Vorbild* in the sense that they catalyze a forward-thinking psychological engagement of the viewer in the present.

Behind Valsinerian aesthetics lies the relation between the two opposed but related notions of schematization and pleromatization, as described in Klempe and Lehman (this volume). For Jaan schematization corresponds to Kant's understanding of creating a representation of a given object by subsuming this object under pre-given concepts and categories, whereby the object's specificity is diminished. Through schematization then, the human world "...loses in its richness of affective and mental, personal and interpersonal, heterogeneity" (Valsiner, 2006, p. 2). In contradistinction but related to this sensemaking process is pleromatization. Unlike the process of subsumption, pleromatization provides a more generalized concept or sign of what is represented, creating a semiotic sphere transcending the object. Thus, signs carrying a pleromatic sense "...guarantee that all persons who come into contact with them can derive their particular interpretation of such signs in the direction suggested by the sign" (p. 2). Pleroma therefore aligns with its etymological roots from Greek, namely, that of a totality, wholeness, and fullness. Unlike schematizations' reduction of a sign's complexity to a simple concept or category, it signifies that complexity is instead enhanced turning the sign into an even more complex field of meaning. Through schematization the complex human sensemaking process is homogenized, whereas through pleromatization it is heterogenized. The former thus denotes a clearly defined sign and the latter a more ambiguous sense with an abundance of meaning tied to it. Pleromatization might therefore be seen as an aesthetic concretization of the hyper-generalized semiotic field (see above).

Historically this relation between schema and pleroma might be taken to resemble the relation between the sublime and the beautiful we find in different versions within the aesthetic tradition. Whether we understand beauty as an aesthetic relation of rationalist importance – e.g., the famous disinterested interest – or of empiricist importance, beauty as related to the pleasurable, behind both, aesthetics carries a sense of being "object"-related, as Böhme (1993) has expressed it. Beautiful objects tend to be understood through relatively clear and stable categories. They might be subtly varied, but inherently capable of being easily judged. Within this sense of beauty artworks are cultivated as in European gardens, naturalistic paintings, or sculptures. The sublime, however, tends instead to "explode" the cultivated, being less definable and carrying with it a sense of uncontrollable power, intenseness, and being terrifying. It is perhaps in the vicinity of how Rudolf Otto understood the numinous as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* – a mysterious power invoking sensemaking processes of both attraction and withdrawal. Of letting oneself be captured by an overwhelming sense of something not entirely graspable, or instead recurring to some sort of safe place with an unambiguous identification. In a more secular understanding, it resembles Böhme's (1993) concept of atmosphere, the ambiguous nature of the aesthetic relation between people and objects as being everywhere and nowhere in particular; not judgeable, or "schematizable" of either objects or persons, but another kind of sensemaking process emerging from the relation between people and objects as at once being intangible and all-encompassing

(see Valsiner, 2017a). A third concept in the history of aesthetics relating beauty and the sublime, namely, the picturesque, sprung from an aesthetic interest in the landscape (paintings and rustic) capable of *framing* the aesthetic experience as both rich and forceful, varied, and irregular. As Brady (2013) claims “Beauty and the picturesque, as theorized in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, do not share the sublime’s great scale, power and mixed emotional response. But irregularity sets both the picturesque and the sublime apart from beauty” (p. 171). We might here have a form-like alternative to the *Gestalt* with its laws representing “...the schematization focus of meaning construction. In contrast – landscapes and their paintings guide our visual meaning-making to the opposite – feeding into the pleromatization process” (Valsiner, 2017a, p. 110). The picturesque, thus, might be a precursor to the notion of *Ganzheit* within Valsiner’s aesthetics uniting the general and the particular.

Our brief turn to central concepts in the history of aesthetics shows the broad foundation of Jaan’s thinking on the topic as well as his original contribution through a semiotic reformulation and innovative development of these and similar concepts.

## 6 Part VI. Psychology as a Global Science

Jaan has consistently emphasized the need to build psychology on truly global foundations and that innovations often come from the periphery rather than the center. It has been widely acknowledged today that the vast majority of participants in psychology studies (97% to be exact) come from the “Western World” (67% from the USA), which are WEIRD (Western educated industrialized, rich, and democratic) outliers within the span of humanity (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan, 2010). However, far less often has the point been made that not only participants in studies but also global researchers should play a key role in the discipline’s advancement with their specific intellectual traditions and interests. The typical perspective is that knowledge goes out from the West to the far corners of the globe, rather than knowledge coming from those corners to enrich a science currently centered in the so-called West (Chaudhary, this volume; Valsiner, 2012). Jaan has more than anyone practiced orchestrating an international co-constructive exchange, which takes a number of forms. First, his journals’ editorial boards (viz., *Culture & Psychology* and *Integrative Psychology and Behavioral Science*) are truly international, in contrast to most journals who’s editorial board members come mainly from the USA.

Second, Jaan is a frequent international traveler which allows him to carry on long-standing collaboratives in many countries around the world (as can be attested by the international contributions to this book – esp., Brazil and Japan). While doing his undergraduate degree with Jaan at Clark University, the first author remembers a map that had been posted next to Jaan’s office with the question “Where in the world is Jaan?” on it and pins to place his location. The second author, who visited Clark University in 2012, similarly remembers clocks on his office wall with different time zones of frequently visited locations. The global “partnership” with local

contexts as a way of developing general knowledge is elaborated by Villadsen and Hviid, this volume), as well as in the particular case of China (Xu et al., this volume).

Third, Jaan created informal forums for people to discuss ideas. Many in Jaan's orbit are familiar with his "kitchen-seminars" (k-seminars) – so named because they originally took place in Clark University's psychology department kitchen. Jaan encourages students, international visitors, and anyone else to freely take part in the seminars. They are also connected internationally through videoconferencing. Although they were his concoction, Jaan gave himself the role of humbly serving strongly brewed coffee to all present. He would remain largely quiet for the first part of the seminar, taking in the discussion, but would at some point, usually when things had reached a standstill, intervene with a brilliant synthesis of positions and an idea for a future research project. The k-seminars moved to Aalborg University with Jaan but are now organized through University of Salerno by Pina Marsico and Luca Tateo (who had planned to write a chapter for this book on the kitchen seminar but unfortunately were not able to in the end because of time constraints). Jaan has himself recently started a new seminar called the "living room seminars" (l-seminars) with local students in Aalborg and others interested to participate by Zoom.

## 7 Part VII. Epistemological Foundations of Psychology

The seventh part discusses epistemological and ontological issues in relation to Jaan's cultural psychology. His epistemological work has overall centered around countering a myopic view of psychology as a knowledge-creating discipline, namely, as predominantly experimental and positivistic. In a recent publication, Valsiner (2017b) turns to William James to describe the "blind spots" in the epistemology of psychology. Around the time of James, psychology "...became increasingly narrowed down toward prioritizing the physiological side of psychological phenomena. Psychology became close to experimental physiology and established its ideals in physics (the Helmholtz-Wundt line of study) leaving the complexities of the *psyche* to a secondary place in the investigation" (p. 4). Today we will most likely term this a naturalistic reductionism – the reduction of any scientific investigation to a natural scientific investigation with appertaining scientific methods as the only ones counting. For Jaan, James points towards two blind spots in the epistemology of psychology, which are continued in mainstream experimental psychology today as well.

The first is allowing for mentalistic descriptions of phenomena. James noted that the psychologists in his time naively thought that the meaning of a word simply referred to the phenomena denoted by the word. But as Valsiner (2017b) observes "The naming of a psychological state is not the same as the state itself..." (p. 4). Saying "I feel pain" is not the same exclaimed at a funeral or in a gym. It might very well not even refer to the same phenomena. Thus, the meaning of "being in pain" cannot be separated from circumstances in which it is exclaimed or where pain behavior is shown through cultural practices involving different signs and symbols. Psychological states are thus tied up, epistemologically, with contextual

considerations for understanding knowledge claims. Thus, it is not a given that knowledge produced under experimental conditions within a lab can be taken to imply anything more than being the result of a particular experiment within a lab.

The second blind spot is the behavioral credo of seeking to keep a clear distinction between observer and observed, hence not accepting that the “Psychologists’ own subjective standing in their relations to what they study inevitable frames the results of the study” (p. 4). The objectivity of understanding psychological phenomena is not achieved by erasing the perspective of the researcher, but instead by embracing it as a necessary condition. Scientific knowledge in psychology is both objective and subjective. Of course, not every perspective of the researcher is relevant; it is the educated intuition achieved as a result of being initiated into the social practices of science that matter (p. 21). The subjectivity of the researcher as an educated intuition comes out in the use of imagination and *Einfühlung* aiming for a holistic understanding of the phenomena in question. Paralleling the distinction between schema and pleroma above, it here becomes the distinction between part and whole (p. 5). Instead of forcing phenomena to fit with pre-given epistemological procedures in the form of “schematic” manuals for conducting research (e.g. reducing phenomena by explaining them through natural scientific methods only), we need to accept the complexity of phenomena. The educated intuition of the researcher is therefore a *sine qua non* for agile adjustment of theories and methods in studying complex and dynamic psychological phenomena.

Overcoming these blind spots has at least two consequences. First, it means developing a new more open epistemology as Salvatore (this volume) describes it, involving the need for constructing more general theories of psychological phenomena, incorporating conceptions of emergence, dynamic holism, affective semiosis, and an understanding of scientific knowledge as both idiographic and nomothetic, which are linked by abductive inferences. For Straub (this volume), it means developing an action-theoretical conception of cultural psychology where “action” and “culture” only can be understood in light of each other. This, then, necessitates investigations into aspects of intentionality, historicity, and creativity. Mammen (this volume) and Christensen (this volume) agree with Jaan’s arguments against naturalistic reductionist explanations of psychological phenomena but claim that these arguments tend towards overshadowing the possibility of non-reductionist but still naturalistic understandings of selfsame phenomena. For Mammen this means that cultural psychology needs to acknowledge that most of modern natural science is not reductionist; instead, it is psychologists uncritically incorporating outdated science who are the reductionists. Christensen tries to delineate a space within Jaan’s conception of psychology to insert a pragmatist conception of facts as part of normative psychological phenomena.

The second consequence is more related to science as an institution. Arguing against mainstream psychology means both opening up to different insights concerning psychological phenomena – including forgotten insights from the history of psychology and insights from other scientific disciplines like anthropology or philosophy – but also establishing new publishing outlets allowing for theoretical and methodological openness while retaining scientific rigor. As Toomela (this volume)

claims, Jaan has managed to achieve all that, being editor in chief of two very influential cultural psychological journals, on top of editing both book series and thematic books. An additional comical example of this is Jaan's rejected paper project described in his wordpress blog as follows:

***THE REJECTED PAPERS PROJECT:***

*Included here are papers that were summoned by the journal or volume editors, who at times very actively insisted that their publication projects could not live without these solicited contributions. Yet, after receiving the texts, they refused to publish them, sometimes because their "peer review systems" suggested such verdict. These papers are made publicly available here as they may contain some ideas that are valuable in themselves (only the readers can decide), and the symbolic act of rejecting them would only accentuate their value.*

What is intriguing here is the last sentence: what does it imply? How can a rejection at the same time accentuate the value of the rejected? Well, it might indicate that mainstream psychology is paradigmatic in Kuhn's sense, i.e., a conservative extension of already accepted assumptions, dealing only with puzzle solving – problems are pieces taken to fit nicely within the overall puzzle when solved – and not addressing genuine problems or anomalies of the paradigm as a whole. If so, then rejected papers are reminders (at least sometimes) of the borders of the prevailing scientific paradigms and at the same time an invitation to explore new territories and achieve new insights. There are limits to epistemology in psychology, and the most profound task – Jaan reminds us – is not only staying within and reproducing and accumulating knowledge within this limit, but pushing it, eventually transgressing it and innovating the discipline in the process.

## **8 Part VIII. Innovating Methodology**

A necessary consequence of rethinking the epistemological basis of psychology is that the whole notion of methodology and related concepts (like empirical data, or systematicity) have to be developed as well. In a number of publications, Jaan – individually and with collaborators – has developed new perspectives on methodology, like the methodology cycle (Branco & Valsiner, 1997; see also Märtsin, this volume) and the Trajectory Equifinality Approach (see Sato et al., this volume) as well as related concepts like catalysis (see Beckstead, this volume; Stänicke & Lindstad, this volume) and self-reflectivity (see Carriere, this volume). Behind these new developments lie a critical diagnosis of the use of methods in contemporary psychology and especially the exclusive use of quantitative methods (e.g. Toomela & Valsiner 2010; Valsiner 2014b, 2017b). This critique follows naturally from the epistemology outlined above. Etymologically *methodos* referred to the pursuit of a goal – scientific or otherwise – but without implying any obligatory procedures. As Toulmin (2001) has emphasized “The pursuit of knowledge was thus a special case of the broader idea of pursuits in general; and the idea of a pursuit that requires one to conform to a specific set of procedures is a further narrowing of the concept” (p. 84). Several points can be taken from this.

First, “method” was originally understood as more akin to the use of *methods*, with using conceived as a dynamic process reflectively aligning with the object (the knowledge) of what was pursued. Jaan has in several places argued that the use of quantification in psychology is inappropriate to understand psychological phenomena as a whole (e.g., Valsiner, 2014b, 2017b). Inappropriate can here mean two things: first that the use of quantitative methods provides us with limited but still relevant knowledge of psychological phenomena and second that the first misses the underlying point of understanding psychological phenomena and we therefore need to dismiss quantification from the outset. Jaan is probably more inclined towards the latter than the former, claiming that the whole idea of measuring psychological phenomena fails to capture its distinctiveness. To see why, let’s give an example referred to by Toulmin, namely, Holz and Azrin (1966). Their paper used Skinner’s standards for measurement as a means for evaluating existing studies of human verbalization at the time. Surprisingly only three studies met those standards, concerned with stammering, enunciation of sibilants, and the speech of psychotic patients in a mental ward. Hence, it turned out “...you could make the study of human verbal behavior truly scientific only if you limited yourself to observing *vocalization* rather than *verbalization*...” (Toulmin, 2001, p. 92). The point being that studying language use this way only says something about how linguistic sounds can be produced and nothing about how linguistic meaning emerges. Thus, it misses the key features of language use: to convey meaning, communicate, and thereby establish a common understanding among people, and not a behavioristic explanation of the production of sounds. Jaan (Valsiner, 2014b, p. 5) presents a similar example of measuring “cheating,” by methodologically capturing common language meanings of “cheating” and generalizing these in an inductive fashion. The generalization results in an index, a quantified accumulation of a set of items accepted as representations of cheating as a phenomenon. Jaan’s point is, then, that this only creates an illusion of clarifying the phenomenon, because “*Cheating* on psychological science becomes defined *through the very instrument that we have constructed* to ‘measure it’” (p. 5). Thus, through the act of “measurement” the notion of cheating becomes reified, projected into an index of explanations of possible psychological or “mindful” responses of ordinary persons – data on cheating can now be measured and theories developed on this basis. But “In reality, we have cheated ourselves – through inventing a new personality characteristic supposedly located in the human mind” (p. 5) and thereby failing to understand “cheating” as a genuinely meaningful psychological phenomenon.

Second, implied by method was therefore not the narrow sense that one method – a specific set of procedures – was to be the procrustean bed whereupon all kinds of pursuits of knowledge were forced to fit. Just as the naturalistic reduction described above is often followed by a methodological reduction, i.e., knowledge can only be gained by using one specific method. Arguing against this *methodological myopia* has a precursor in Paul Feyerabend. His famous book *Against Method* (Feyerabend, 1975), contrary to the title, wasn’t arguing against method per se, but only the narrow conception of it. This meant that no exceptionless methodological rules governing the growth of knowledge exist. Furthermore, claiming that such rules actually do

exist would only enforce restrictive conditions of the development of new theories. Feyerabend termed this position epistemological anarchism or dadaism – not to be confused with political anarchism – and claimed, provocatively, that when it comes to scientific methods “anything goes.” Discarding the potential academic frivolity, Feyerabend’s position still expresses a genuine *methodological* sensibility towards both the complexity of the subject matter studied in scientific practices and the many different ways of achieving knowledge about this subject matter. Jaan can be seen as a methodological anarchist, emphasizing that giving up quantification in psychology doesn’t lead to its demise. Rather, following an interpretation of Feyerabend, it liberates scientific thinking from a methodological straitjacket, advancing a pluralism in its place and thereby a responsible responsiveness towards the complexity of psychological phenomena. At Clark University, Jaan took the label of “anarchist” and Nick Thompson “fascist” in relation to scientific procedures; to the first author’s memory, the labels were invented by Thompson to both of their delight.

Third, the narrowing of the concept of method is, as Toulmin describes it, a result of historical circumstances and not an inevitable consequence of the march of science. Jaan (Valsiner, 2014b) agrees with this, claiming that quantitative methods “have been prioritized as ‘scientific’ in psychology – without anybody ever proving that these are that” (p. 12). He distinguishes between method and methodology, with method being part of methodology but without the latter being reduced to a sum of methods. Instead, methodology is a strategy for generalization, involving theory, basic assumptions about relating to the phenomena, and the use of appropriate methods, all held together by the educated intuition of the researcher (Branco & Valsiner, 1997; Märtsin, this volume). This, of course, means paying attention to, or rediscovering hitherto forgotten theories and methods, addressing both post- and pre-factum aspects of the research process and introspective as well as extrospective oriented methods.

Jaan’s way of thinking about and efforts of developing methodology can – as suggested above – be described as an example of a responsible responsivity towards the complexity and dynamicity of psychological phenomena. Responsible *responsiveness* as a sensibility towards all aspects of a phenomenon, not disregarding parts because they do not fit within the methodology proposed. *Responsible* responsiveness because the researcher is obliged to reconsider, reject, or rethink methods and theories in light of psychological phenomena resisting these.

## 9 Conclusion

In the final chapter of the book, Jaan offers some short reflections on his approach and the state of the discipline in what he calls “My confession.” This book and its contributions were made as a tribute to Jaan on his 70th birthday, and they certainly are not the end of the story. As Jaan has repeatedly emphasized, human beings continue to live forward and construct novelty. We expect Jaan to continue to innovate for years to come as part of the global development of psychology. As a final statement we would simply like to ask Jaan, as he has asked us many times before (see Xu et al., this volume): “What next?”

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**Part I**  
**Reimagining the History of Psychology**

# Jaan Valsiner: A Ganzheitspsychologist?



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As we write the year 2021, our teacher, mentor, and friend turns 70. In the field of psychology – cultural psychology in particular – Jaan Valsiner has certainly left his mark. His current legacy already spans many decades of countless presentations and publications. But what makes Valsiner more than just a well-published author is that he is one of the few remaining individuals who have not lost connection to psychology’s vast historical roots. Valsiner is keenly aware of the many legacies left behind by the great dinosaurs who once roamed the field of early psychology. This has led Valsiner to continuously push forward novel ideas built upon said legacies, rather than reinventing the wheel under a new terminology. However, Valsiner has been adamant about not wanting to compartmentalize himself into just one particular theoretical framework. Calling Valsiner anything ending with an “-ian” (akin to “Freudian” or “Vygosky’ian”) to indicate his theoretical or philosophical allegiance would undoubtedly lead to vehement objections by Valsiner. In that sense, he is very eclectic. I, however, plan to put to paper a little unspoken truth about Valsiner’s perspective at large. His developmental and holistic outlook is indeed solidly anchored in one particular philosophical and psychological tradition: *Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie*. This little unspoken truth is often overlooked because in most instances Valsiner has breached the benchmark of achievements by the early twentieth-century Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie by guiding it subtly into new avenues, one of them being the twenty-first-century cultural psychology.

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## 1 Valsiner's Teachings and Mentorship: Guidance Into a Brave "New" World

I first met Jaan Valsiner during my time as a graduate student in the Clark University psychology doctoral program. By the end of my time at Clark, I was fortunate not only in having attended some of Valsiner's courses but also in having served as his Teaching Assistant for his cultural psychology seminar and eventually completing my dissertation with Valsiner being the chair of the dissertation committee. Since then, Valsiner and I have collaborated on several projects, and on more than one occasion I have been able to guest-star Valsiner, via video conferencing, in my own cultural psychology seminar at California Lutheran University, thereby allowing my students to meet firsthand the person who they have heard me talk about on so many occasions.

Valsiner's mentorship is largely responsible for the direction my own scholarship has taken me over the years. I entered the Clark program as a staunch proponent of the classic behaviorist doctrine. I had received my prior education from the psychology department at West Virginia University (WVU) in Morgantown, which at that time entailed a program that pretty much declared allegiance to only one point of view: B. F. Skinner's (1904–1990) radical behaviorism.<sup>1</sup> It wasn't until I took Valsiner's "Historical Background of Contemporary Psychology" seminar in 2001 that I first began to more seriously contemplate other perspectives. In his typical manner, Valsiner told me to spend some time in the Clark University Goddard library and look over the rich inventory of original German textbooks from the pioneering days in psychology: "Find something out about the predecessors to cultural psychology." It was in the dimly lit aisles of Goddard that I first began to see a word which Valsiner had once mentioned during one of the early class sessions. It was a word printed on volumes upon volumes of books: *Völkerpsychologie*.

This was a discipline I had never heard of. A "new" world began to open up to me as I sifted through these original texts by psychology's most prominent early figures, Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) in particular. In the case of Wundt, it turned out that his *Völkerpsychologie* was a key area of investigation necessary for understanding Wundt's general approach to psychology. To this day, many introductions to psychology textbooks still list Wilhelm Wundt's approach to psychology right next to Edward Titchener's (1867–1927) school of structuralism which primarily aimed at indexing the mental elements that comprise the structure of the mind. Both Titchener and Wundt are said to have used an introspective method to get at the mind's elements, with Wundt typically receiving an additional sentence or two to stress his use of reaction-time studies. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Wundt was not a structuralist, nor did he rely on pure (or arm-chair) introspection methodology akin to Titchener's general approach. Even Wundt's reaction time

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<sup>1</sup>It may not be surprising to hear that one of Skinner's daughters, Julie Vargas, held a faculty position at WVU for over 35 years until she and her husband, Ernest Vargas, moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 2005.

studies were not all that central to his overall approach, and towards the end of his career he had pretty much abandoned them all together.

Wundt was a voluntarist, trying to understand the psychological *processes* or consciousness as an immediate experience based on the operations of our will (see Diriwächter, 2009). Similarly to Valsiner's present-day approach, an active, goal-directed mind is fundamentally assumed in this paradigm (see Valsiner, 2000).

It is important to stress that Wundt's experimental approach involved studying the elementary processes of consciousness, rather than examining lasting elementary components per se. As Wundt (1922, p. 26) once stated, "The content of psychology is formed exclusively through processes, not lasting objects." We may note here an implicit focus on development in the here and now, something his successors would build upon in the second school of Leipzig. But his experimental approach was not the whole picture of his paradigm. In parallel, Wundt from the very beginnings of his career had a second approach to psychology, namely, that of *Völkerpsychologie*. This second approach was social-developmental in nature and aimed at capturing the higher, more complex mental processes which are reflected in human culture. The approach aimed at understanding the things that cannot be explained based on just an individual mind, but rather were the result of collective minds. For example, language, mythology, or customs cannot be attributed as having originated from a single person, but rather have developed over a long period of time and were the products of many minds. Examining these collective mental products would allow the researcher to deduce the nature of higher mental processes. Herefore, an experimental approach would not be possible because the researcher is not dealing with immediate processes. Instead, the investigator needed to rely on a historical-comparative approach or naturalistic observations. This second approach, running in parallel to his physiological psychology, culminated in ten heavy book volumes, each bearing the title of "*Völkerpsychologie*" (see Diriwächter, 2012).

I was happy to report my findings back to Valsiner. In the evenings, we often shared some good Italian Grappa in his office while discussing my latest findings. Of course, Valsiner pushed on, saying: "There is so much more out there. Dig deeper." I did and traced the origins of *Völkerpsychologie* all the way back to Moritz Lazarus (1824–1903) and his brother-in-law, Hajim Steinthal (1823–1899), who by 1860 had already a journal in place that was devoted to *Völkerpsychologie*<sup>2</sup>; and Clark University had every single issue of that journal in its archives!

Lazarus and Steinthal's initiative on *Völkerpsychologie* preceded Wundt's *Völkerpsychologie*. However, their program was less articulated, more guided by Johann Friedrich Herbart's (1776–1841) philosophy, and seemed more focused (at least in its original vision) on understanding the uniting factors of peoples. More precisely, in the early period of their journal, they were hoping to gain an understanding of *Volksgeist* (Folk-spirit) or *Volkseele* (the folk-soul). In short, their aims seemed to be centered on collective mentality of some kind. Since language varies from folk to folk, but within a given people (such as the Germans or the French), it

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<sup>2</sup>*Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* (1860–1901)

is a shared representative tool that allows us to think in more complex ways, it proved natural that linguistics (or *Sprachwissenschaft*) would be a central focus of investigation and this was reflected in the title of their journal.

It may be worth mentioning here that, of course, Lazarus and Steinthal's initiative itself had several noteworthy predecessors upon whose ideas the framework of *Völkerpsychologie* would be established (see Diriwächter, 2012). For example, Hajim Steinthal's views were particularly shaped by Wilhelm von Humboldt's<sup>3</sup> (1767–1835) work on language. According to Eckardt (1997), two of Humboldt's basic assumptions about language played a large role in the formation of Steinthal's approach to linguistics: (1). The character of language is process oriented. That is, for Humboldt language is not a finished product, but rather it is in every instance something that is becoming, developing, and disappearing. In that sense, language is not to be thought of as a completed work, but rather be looked at in terms of its dynamic functionality or effectiveness. (2). Language and thought form a defining unit and receive their configuration (or *Gestalt*) through "inner form of language or speech" (*innere Sprachform*). This "inner form of language" is different across cultures, which can lead peoples from one part of the world to perceive "things" from different points of view, with different conceptualizations (*Vorstellungen*). Thus, for Humboldt differences in language are not just merely a matter of different sounds and signs, but rather differences in worldviews. The notion of "inner form of language" would receive a central position for Steinthal's early preparations to a *Völkerpsychologie* discipline as it implies different perceptual and thought processes that could be ethnologically investigated.

Language is a constantly developing product of collective mentality and a uniting tool that is most often shared within a given cultural group. This vital system through which humans create meaning has thus been the object of investigation long before cultural psychology had been conceptualized. Wilhelm Wundt was also very interested in this and had devoted the first two of his ten volumes on *Völkerpsychologie* entirely to language. Similarly, since the beginning of his career, Jaan Valsiner had realized the significance of linguistics as a means to getting at how the human<sup>4</sup> mind operates. In fact, at the core of Valsiner's cultural psychology stands semiotic mediation as part of the system of organized psychological functions (Valsiner, 2000) – the meaning-making through the mediation of signs; something that is amply furnished through the use of language.

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<sup>3</sup>Some have even claimed that it was Wilhelm von Humboldt who coined the term "Völkerpsychologie." However, that assertion has not been confirmed (Diriwächter, 2012).

<sup>4</sup>Or in his early publications, primates (e.g., see Valsiner, 1978)

## 2 The Exploration Continues: From Völkerpsychologie to Ganzheitspsychologie

As I began to become more familiar with this old precursor to cultural psychology, and with the traditions of the early German psychologists, Valsiner kept encouraging me to explore more of the early German psychology traditions. Many times, I would just wander through the rows of library books not even fully sure what I was looking for. It was on one of those strolls through the Goddard book aisles containing the old German textbooks that one book suddenly stuck out: It was beige with a single word printed in shiny gold letterings as title. The book was written by Friedrich Sander and Hans Volkelt (1962), and it bore the simple title, *Ganzheitspsychologie*. This was yet another psychology term I was unfamiliar with, and as I began to read the preface, I became seriously intrigued to learn that the people writing this text were not just random German psychologists, but rather turned out to be Wilhelm Wundt's successors.<sup>5</sup>

Upon Wilhelm Wundt's retirement in 1917, his successor Felix Krueger (1874–1948) reorganized and gradually turned Wundt's first Leipzig school of psychology into what became known as the second school of Leipzig: Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie (or "Developmental Holistic Psychology"; see Diriwächter, 2008, 2021). One of the biggest shifts in orientation was to make a break with Wundt's focus on elementary processes that required the conceptual framework of creative synthesis to explain higher processes. The notion of creative synthesis essentially maintained that by melting together elementary processes comes something new, something creative and novel that is not contained in the elementary processes themselves. The second school of Leipzig perspective took the stance that it is misleading to see unrelated elementary processes as merging together to create something novel because those processes were already contained in a developmental progression. Instead, what is happening is that we are dealing with transformed relationships – that is, it is not about the formation of creative synthesis, but rather how already established synthesis transform into new syntheses. Thus, it is more accurate to speak of synthesis transformations. This genetic perspective was holistic in nature and allowed for an implicit fusion between lower and higher mental processes. As such, Wundt's separation between physiological psychology (which was predominantly experimental in nature) and Völkerpsychologie (which was historical-comparative in nature) was essentially not needed. Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie naturally incorporates the social-developmental discipline of Völkerpsychologie.

At its core, Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie follows four main tenets: holism, development, structure, and feelings (see Diriwächter, 2008, 2021). Briefly put, the overarching principle of holism dictates that phenomena must be investigated in their entirety, taking into account that each whole is nested in a greater whole. The tenet of development stresses the transformative nature of the whole – that nothing

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<sup>5</sup>E.g., Friedrich Sander (1889–1971) was Wilhelm Wundt's last assistant.

ever “is,” but rather that everything is in a constant state of “becoming.” The tenet of structure draws attention to the conditions out of which novelty and human experiences emerge. Finally, the tenet of feelings highlights that as humans, we are not just robot-like creatures that follow computer-like schematic algorithms, but rather that our experiences are equally colored by emotional and feeling tones (or *Gefühlston*). The centrality of feelings in defining our psychological experiences wasn’t a new idea, but rather had already been suggested in Wundt’s tridimensional theory of feelings (Diriwächter, 2008, 2021). These four tenets are the main – very broad – orientation points which any psychological investigation necessarily should axiomatically incorporate. Without incorporating these four central tenets, no systemic models of human experiencing would prove adequate.

As usual, while we were sipping our Grappa, Valsiner showed great interest upon hearing about my new discoveries and “pretended” to be surprised at the “new” information I was sharing. I, in turn, was somewhat proud to be finally able to share with Valsiner something I believed he had not previously encountered. Of course, I was wrong: Sometime later while reading Valsiner and van der Veer’s (2000) book, *The Social Mind: Construction of the Idea*, I learned that an entire chapter (Chap. 7) had been devoted to sharing the basic ideas of both *Völkerpsychologie* and *Ganzheitspsychologie*. In retrospect, Valsiner acting surprised may have well been due to the enthusiastic manner in which I presented said information, rather than in regard to the information itself.

Nevertheless, Valsiner encouraged me to continue to pursue my avenue further and offered that I should get others on board and publish our findings about the *Ganzheitspsychologie* tradition in a special edition of his journal, *From Past to Future: Clark Working Papers on the History of Psychology*. This is very typical of Valsiner’s mentorship: don’t endlessly discuss, but rather produce a tangible product that can serve as the launchpad for subsequent investigations. Hence, words turned into action and in 2004 issue 1 of volume 5 of *From Past to Future* was devoted to *Ganzheitspsychologie*.<sup>6</sup> It was around this time that Valsiner shared with me something he hardly ever did: an act of self-classification. We were having another one of our discussions about the current state of mainstream US psychology while standing in the mailroom of the Clark University psychology department. This wasn’t the first time we were discussing the current crisis that psychology is facing,<sup>7</sup> and Valsiner had many times drawn comparisons to earlier crises and crossroads that the discipline of psychology had faced. But this time Valsiner added that he saw himself (in terms of his intellectual ideas) like one of those early dinosaurs who is just refusing (or just not ready yet) to become extinct. When asked whether

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<sup>6</sup>Four years later, the information on *Ganzheitspsychologie* presented in “From Past to Future” had been further expanded upon and published in the book *Striving for the Whole: Creating Theoretical Syntheses* which was co-edited by myself and Jaan Valsiner.

<sup>7</sup>I.e., that much of mainstream psychology is largely a-theoretical and non-developmental in its general orientation, relying on standardized methods that often void any contextual circumstances and mislead or blind the researcher to the fluid and dynamic nature of the given phenomenon and the greater whole in which it is nested.

he identified with the general orientation of Ganzheitspsychologie (as conceived by the second Leipzig school of psychology), Valsiner replied affirmative while nodding his head up and down, “Yes, if I had to be placed into a general compartment, it would be that of Ganzheitspsychologie.”

### 3 Ganzheitspsychologie and Valsiner’s Developmental Perspective

It is clear that Valsiner did not start out as a Ganzheitspsychologist. But from early on, his interests lied with a developmentally focused approach to psychology. It may not be surprising to know that by the end of the 1980s, Valsiner had become an expert in Lev Vygotsky’s (1896–1934) developmental approach, culminating in his co-published (with René van der Veer) work, *Understanding Vygotsky: a quest for synthesis* (1991). Vygotsky, of course, had been heavily influenced by Wilhelm Wundt’s Völkerpsychologie. Yet, while most of Valsiner’s publications up to that point (especially during the 1980s) had been focused on developmental perspectives, they also showed several other notable characteristics, even more so in more recent times.

First, Valsiner was never just interested in simply presenting ideas per se, but rather how particular ideas had come about – i.e., the genesis of those theoretical ideas. After all, understanding the genetic perspective allows one not only to follow the evolution but also the further development of passed-on knowledge. Valsiner was never content with just advocating a particular idea or theory, but rather has always been focused on how said ideas or theories can be further developed.

Second, development cannot be correctly understood without understanding context. Context represents the structure or conditions through which development occurs. Out of nothing emerges nothing! It is the transformed relationships (or synthesis transformations), in the human domain most clearly happening via semiotic mediation, that allow researchers to understand human meaning-making and, by doing so, the human mind as the command center that stands at the heart of it all. Most certainly, Valsiner’s early career interests in language and psycholinguistics have contributed to his advocacy of the prime importance for human meaning-making via semiotics. But not only that, when it comes to development and transformation, we also see Valsiner’s interest in a focus on the Microgenetic domain of human experiences manifest itself in his writings. Microgenesis – under its former conceptualization of “Aktualgenese” (or “actual genesis”) – is of course a legacy of the Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie school at Leipzig (Diriwächter, 2009). After all, Heinz Werner (1890–1964) who is typically credited with having coined the term Microgenesis in his 1956 publication, *Microgenesis and Aphasia*, most certainly took part (as a participant) in Erich Wohlfahrt’s (1925/1932) pioneering study on Aktualgenese of visual percepts. While at Clark University, Heinz Werner would then continue to focus on human developmental processes.

Third, while some of Valsiner's early publications dealt with non-humans (e.g., see his 1979 publication on the ontogenesis of interaction in primates), most of his work has centered almost entirely on topics pertaining to human developmental processes.<sup>8</sup> As already indicated above, a core feature of human experiencing involves the processes of feelings and emotions. Herefore, Valsiner has continuously worked on a model he has coined, "Levels of human semiotic mediation of affective experiencing." Among other things, this holistic model of human affective experiencing echoes what co-founder of Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie, Felix Krueger (1928/1953), had also alluded to, namely, that affective experiences (feelings in particular) are multidimensional and often may lack a concrete structure. His law of holistic experience stated that any psychical partial function that is highlighted by the researcher necessarily loosens the total functionality of our disposition, thereby endangering the unity of it. In that regard, we can say that Valsiner's model of affective experiences has not only taken the multidimensional nature into account but also overcome the often-committed fallacy by researchers to only center in on partial functionality of the affective domain. Valsiner's model *is* holistic in its orientation.

From these broad, overarching axioms, it should become clear to see how Valsiner's perspective fits into the broad tenets of the Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie doctrine. Again, Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie is a holistic, developmental approach that places at its core a focus on (a) the nature of the whole, (b) the developmental (i.e., transformative) processes, (c) the given structure (i.e., the conditions out of which experiences emerge), and (d) the centrality of feelings and affective domain in human experiencing. It is hard not to find these themes contained in Valsiner's writings.

Naturally, because of his diverse work, Valsiner does not lend himself well to be classified as something concrete (other than that he studies cultural psychology). Consequentially, one may be inclined to believe that he cannot be simply schematized into Ganzheitspsychologie from the second school of Leipzig of early twentieth-century psychology. Most certainly, Valsiner's intellectual heritage – the scholars who have left their mark on Valsiner – seem too numerous and vast for him to just be categorized into one thing. Furthermore, Valsiner's research interest are vast, covering anything from Ornaments as holistic devices of cultural guidance of human conduct (see Valsiner, 2019) to the re-examination of the history of psychology for a better understanding of why the field seems to be in a perpetual crisis (see Valsiner, 2012). Many of the topics Valsiner likes to deal with, such as art and aesthetic experiences, lie outside the field of topics chosen by mainstream psychologists and cross over into other disciplines. Given this diversity, it may have been most fitting when back in 1998 he once called himself a "sociogenetic developmental personologist" (Mey & Mruck, 1998), thereby highlighting his reluctance to be compartmentalized into any particular theoretical credo or specific area of research.

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<sup>8</sup>And in the cases of dealing with non-human living creatures, it is usually done so for a better understanding of humanity (e.g., see his co-authored work on "The Wisdom of the Web: Learning from Spiders", 2009).

That said, and to put it bluntly, Valsiner is a Ganzheitspsychologist at heart. His general approach to twenty-first-century cultural psychology follows within the framework that had been set up by the early Ganzheitspsychologie advocates. The difference between Valsiner and the early advocates of Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie is merely that Valsiner has long expanded upon the early doctrine. That is, he refined the theoretical perspective not only by merging ideas with those by other theorists but also by spending much more time with new, necessary methodological approaches aimed at capturing both the developmental and holistic criteria of psychological phenomena. This kind of scholarship is most clearly reflected in his 2017 book, *From Methodology to Methods in Human Psychology*. In this publication, Valsiner synthesizes the Ganzheitspsychologie tradition with other circulating ideas from a variety of existing approaches, thereby presenting new possible avenues for a non-reductionist methodology. The key here is to see methodology not as a “toolbox” of ready-made tests, but rather as a general epistemological approach. In other words, rather than just applying methods based on pre-existing consensus, researchers should be thinking through the system of methodology (Valsiner, 2017).

It may be said that Valsiner’s eclectic views, which nevertheless are carefully crafted to ensure compatibility and theoretical coherence, have given the field of Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie a new breath of life to make it suitable for what is needed for a twenty-first-century psychology. It is precisely because of his eclecticism that a new wind was able to carry forward the somewhat stagnant field whose ideas had started to gather dust. In this sense, we can see Valsiner’s advocacy for open-systemic approaches to psychology being directly applied to where it counts in order to generate the necessary novelty to keep the original ideas alive by catapulting them to their next developmental stage: refinement!

## 4 Final Thoughts

Valsiner is a scholar who truly matters to the advancement of the field of psychology. While his humble manner of being would never proclaim or admit this himself, his mentorship and his own scholarship have inspired and guided many new aspiring cultural psychologists from around the globe to approach psychological investigations from a more creative rather than rigid toolbox like cookie-cutter approach.

We owe much to Valsiner. His thinking and actions have transcended beyond one particular domain, thereby affecting many people who are now benefiting from this. Valsiner has managed to bring his developmental-holistic psychology (i.e., Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie) perspective in a uniting manner to scholars from around the world via his branch of cultural psychology. Be it through the legendary kitchen meetings he first established at Clark University back in 1997 or through his organizational skills to unite scholars by having them participate on various new initiatives (e.g., publication projects) coming either out of the kitchen meeting discussions or through his role at the center for cultural psychology at Aalborg University in Denmark.

In closing, I would like to salute Valsiner for what he has accomplished during his many decades of work so far and raise my glass of Grappa to what is still left to come!

Your student, colleague, and friend,  
Rainer Diriwächter

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# Rising up to Humanity: Towards a Cultural Psychology of *Bildung*



Svend Brinkmann

## 1 Introduction

I have had the privilege of knowing Jaan Valsiner as a colleague at Aalborg University since 2013. Before that I knew him of course as a scholar and prolific writer of books and articles on cultural psychology and developmental science. Jaan Valsiner is the most generous, open-minded, and inclusive intellectual one can imagine. He is always able to facilitate the development of people's ideas and is extremely helpful in organizing collaborations between researchers around the world. Jaan Valsiner has not only provided innovative ideas for psychology and the human sciences at large but has also been a leading force in developing a necessary scientific infrastructure of journals, book series, and scientific meetings that has enabled cultural psychology to establish itself as a sustainable approach to the human mind now and in the future. For all this, and much more, we owe him enormous gratitude.

Personally, it was a great joy for me to have Jaan Valsiner as a colleague, since he really understood and helped me develop my writings on psychology as a normative science (e.g., Brinkmann, 2018). I have developed this view on the basis of the practice philosophies of the likes of Aristotle, Wittgenstein, and the phenomenological tradition (and also more recent thinkers like Rom Harré), and although Jaan Valsiner's cultural psychology of semiotic mediation has a different historical trajectory, both lines of thought end with many of the same conclusions: that psychology is the science of human conduct and that such conduct is susceptible to social norms that organize the psyche (Valsiner, 2014). I will not go into detail here, but simply say that the basic argument for the normativity of psychology is that

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whenever we are presented with some psychological phenomenon, we are dealing with something that does not simply happen – like a blind causal process – but rather something that can be done more or less well by skilled persons who can be held accountable. Thinking can be done more or less adequately, feeling emotions can be done in more or less sensitive ways, perceiving can be done more or less veridically, and so on.

What I would like to do in this brief tribute to Jaan Valsiner is ask if the very being of humans is normative too. In other words: Is it only what people say, do, feel, and think that is normative (and studied by psychology), or is it also people themselves? It seems that not only the acts of people, but people themselves can be considered as wholes that develop through normative frameworks. It is with much hesitation that I pose this question of normativity, for it is laden with significant risks. Particularly the risk of sorting people into categories of “normatively good enough” and “not good enough” based on an alleged scientific understanding of what good means in relation to human beings. This is a very dangerous endeavor.

Fortunately, we have the long historical tradition of *Bildung* that begins with the Greeks and culminates with German philosophy with the likes of Herder, Humboldt, and Gadamer. Here the point is not to conclude that some human beings are not good enough, but rather to understand that we all share a common humanity that can and should be realized – but always in and through the cultural processes of which we are a part. I thus wish to open a discussion about the relation between psychology – in the Valsinerian sense – and the tradition of *Bildung*. Unfortunately, there is no suitable translation of *Bildung* into English. Sometimes the term used is simply “education,” while others refer to “formation” and even “ethical formation” specifically (see Lovibond, 2002). Lovibond defines it as “a process organized by values and interests emanating from the specifically *human* part of ‘nature’” (p. xi). In the remainder of this text, I shall simply stick to the German word *Bildung*, which we call *dannelse* in Danish.

## 2 The Idea of *Bildung*

There are a multitude of definitions, theories, and traditions regarding the concept of *Bildung*, and I cannot go through the whole history of the concept here, so let me say very briefly that I find Gadamer’s general approach helpful, which in turn builds on Herder’s from the late eighteenth century. *Bildung* is here defined simply as “rising up to humanity through culture” (Gadamer, 2000, p. 10).

There are three keywords in this definition: rising up, humanity, and culture. The most important word is probably that in the middle: humanity. The notion of *Bildung*, which goes all the way from the Greek idea of *paideia* in antiquity and thus to Gadamer’s in the twentieth century, is based on the notion of a universal humanity that is neither merely present in its actuality nor something that unfolds by itself and automatically. Humanity – whatever it is – is something that needs to be *cultivated*. Here we already arrive at the latter central concept: culture. As we also know

from Jaan Valsiner's tireless critiques of culture as a variable (see, e.g., Valsiner, 2007), culture is not a causal force that influences people from the outside, but rather semiotic and material resources that people use in the course of living their lives together. Rising up is the third key concept, and it appears to be almost synonymous with upbringing. To be raised is to be brought *up*. It can also involve being "elevated" from the position as a student or pupil, which, fittingly, is *elev* in Danish (literally someone who should be elevated).

Educational thinking is full of such vertical metaphors, which relate to the bodily experience of being able to see more when one gets up. It may also simply be about growing and gaining ever greater and broader views. Formation or *Bildung* is a process of elevation, where it is not proteins and carbohydrates that build one up, but cultural processes and forms of practice that make you grow.

If *Bildung* is the elevation of humanity through culture, the concept can be said to be opposed to other (more popular) concepts denoting human development, which are more connected to the individual's *self*-development such as competence development, self-optimization, personal development, or self-realization. There are many more in the same ballpark. These concepts refer to the person having a particular individual core, a set of signature strengths (as talked about in positive psychology), particular competencies, learning styles, or intelligences that should be realized to the largest possible extent. In short, self-development is about becoming oneself. You may even have to become "the best *version* of yourself," as it is called with the mystifying language of the time (as if people came out in versions).

In the words of the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2020), self-development in that sense is a *singularizing* process in which one must be individualized to the widest possible extent and first and foremost be authentic. Reckwitz has analyzed the development of modernity as a story of how the economy, working life, culture, lifestyles, and politics are singularized. This means that less and less emphasis is placed on the general, on humanity in general, and more and more on the particular, the unique, the different, the extraordinary, the authentic. Reckwitz does not specifically discuss *Bildung*, but on the basis of his analysis, it is not strange if this concept has today been delimited by the singular. Reckwitz writes that the general faces a crisis, as it has become odious to refer to a common human nature in the first place. One can no longer talk about – or on behalf of – the general, because one is then accused of forgetting that "everyone is special" and that certain groups and subcultures give rise to specific experiences, which especially has been the starting point of the movements of identity politics. If one only takes the unique individual as a starting point or the identity group affiliation, however, it becomes difficult to talk about *Bildung* in the sense of rising up to humanity. When general humanity is cast in doubt, we get at best singularized conceptions of formation, such as crystallized in individualized concepts of self-formation.

I believe we need to resurrect the idea of humanity in general. Not because we should deny that all people are unique – for they certainly are – and not because we should downplay the importance of people taking part in particular groups, communities, and nations that give them identity and a sense of belonging. I just think there is reason to keep in mind Kluckhohn and Murray's (1953) classic

psychological dictum that “Every man is in certain respects (a) like all other men, (b) like some other men, (c) like no other man” (p. 53). Today, we should talk about “human beings” rather than “men,” but the point remains valid: that we are all first and foremost simply human. Biology determines us as *Homo sapiens* and philosophy (at least Aristotle’s) as *zoon logikon*, or rational animals. As such we share a lot with all other humans. Second, it means that we all share a language, a gender, a nationality, and much more with some other people, but not with everyone. And third, it means that we each have special stories, relationships, and commitments because we are exactly who we are as individuals. It’s just me who’s me. I’m like no one else.

A large part of the current culture of self-development and self-optimization focuses almost exclusively on the third aspect, i.e., where we are like no other (for a critique, see Brinkmann, 2017), whereas the culture of *Bildung* must necessarily also work from where we are like everyone else, if we are ever to rise up to humanity and in that sense realize not simply our inner selves, but our general humanity in a normative sense.

The Greek name for this process was, as already mentioned, *paideia*, which referred to the set of bodily, mental, and social capabilities one must acquire and develop as a human being. When the Greeks saw the Delphic maxim “Know thyself” over the temple of Apollo, it was hardly a call to identify one’s particular learning style or realize one’s own inner nature. Rather, it meant something like know yourself as an ordinary human being before entering the temple, as a mortal being among other mortals facing the sacred and the superhuman.

That everyone is like everyone else in certain respects is also the background to much ethical thought, since it is the springboard of a recognition that all human beings are created equal, as it is said in the American Declaration of Independence. Of course, this does not mean that all people are equally wise, skilled, or inventive, but simply that all people are equal in dignity and worth. This is the basic idea of humanism, which we have known in germ form since antiquity, and which grew stronger as an idea in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, but which risks being challenged today if the very idea of a common humanity or a general human nature is questioned.

### 3 Thinking with Aristotle and Arendt

The most obvious connection for me between this approach to *Bildung* as rising up to humanity and Jaan Valsiner’s semiotic cultural psychology is found in a common interest in thinking. Not just thinking as utility or problem-solving, but also thinking as free semiotic play. In other words, non-instrumental thinking. This is absolutely central to the process of *Bildung* for Aristotle and in particular for Hannah Arendt (1978) who developed his line of thought on this point. I will therefore ask: What role may thinking play in the rising up of humanity through culture? How does thinking relate to *Bildung*? To answer these questions, I will highlight the

intellectual connection between Aristotle in antiquity and Hannah Arendt in the twentieth century.

The former famously unfolded a teleological worldview that may be outdated in terms of the nature of the physical world, but which nonetheless seems inevitable when it comes to human life that is teleological and normative. We know today that stones fall to the ground and fire rises towards the sky due to causal forces of nature, whereas Aristotle believed that the stone wanted to be near the ground and the fire near the sun because they each belong here. Aristotle's teleological worldview, which read meaning and intention into the movements of everything, suffered a blow with modern mechanical science (Galileo, Newton, etc.), which disenchanting the world from the Renaissance onwards. Human deeds and experiences were also subsequently disenchanting, and the modern understanding of the mind – for example, from the emerging psychology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – was based on causal explanations of human behavior. With notable exceptions, psychology modeled itself on the model of mechanical physics, most clearly in behaviorism, but also in parts of later neuro- and cognitive science. This is very problematic if psychology is about normativity, for humans cannot be understood causally in the same way as fire and stones, as people have intentions, perform actions for various reasons, and possess a human nature that can be brought to unfold. For this reason we can still read Aristotle's psychology and ethics with great benefit, whereas his natural science writings are more dated.

In his study of Aristotle's psychology, Daniel Robinson says that "Aristotle's 'human science' is a characterology, a theory of 'personality' as today's psychologists would call it" (Robinson, 1989, p. 94). Aristotle's developed psychology is not found in his *On the Soul*, but in his practical works, notably the *Ethics*, where he is concerned with the human being as an intentional creature whose operations demands teleological explanation. It is here that the very idea of psychology as a normative science originates, for Aristotle demonstrated that although psychological phenomena like emotions may have physiological (and thus causal) components, this is not what defines them as such. Rather, it is the ways that these phenomena are subject to praise and blame within human moral orders, given that they can be performed more or less well in a normative sense. As Harré (1983, p. 136) once noted, the reason why dread and anger are psychological phenomena (i.e., emotions) but not indigestion or exhaustion – although all have behavioral manifestations as well as fairly distinctive experiential qualities – is that only the former fall, for us, within a moral order. Harré says "for us," since he believes that classifications of what does or does not belong in the moral order are culturally relative, which means that what counts as a psychological phenomenon is culturally relative.

I think we need to be careful at this point and not draw this conclusion so quickly, for there might be features of human nature that transcend cultural differences, and this is where a common foundation of morality may reside. Or, as Robinson explains Aristotle's human science: "Aristotle put forth a species of social constructionism, but one limited by realistic ethological considerations and the unique problems created by a self-conscious creature able to give and expect reasons for actions"

(Robinson, 1992, p. 97). That “man is taught by the polis” (*polis andra didaska*) is a premise in Aristotelian “social constructionism,” but there might be universal moral values that must be in place for the polis to teach humans anything and to which humans should be “raised.” It might be not only that psychological phenomena are normative but also that not all normativity is conventional. Understanding this common humanity should be central to the process of *Bildung*.

In summary, according to Aristotle human beings have an inherent purpose, which must be developed through *Bildung*. Becoming human, according to this Greek thought, means that one realizes a potential one has within oneself. Not the potential to become “the best version of oneself” as a unique individual, but the potential to become a human being through rising up to humanity. Aristotle’s ethics is all about understanding humanity and the good human life in a normative sense, and it is unfolded in a tension between the active life, where it is noble actions and political participation that are in focus as activities that have inherent value, and the contemplative life, where it is knowledge of and reflection on existential, ethical, and cosmological issues that are highlighted as goals in themselves (Aristotle, 1976). Humans can find deep joy in looking at stars and considering our pettiness in the vast universe, for example, and Aristotle sees this as an activity that contributes to a flourishing life, precisely because it is *not* useful in an instrumental way. In Aristotle’s eyes, human beings are the only known creatures who can think for no other purpose than to think, and the cultivation of that ability is therefore a crucial component of *Bildung*.

It was this thread that Hannah Arendt picked up in her last – and unfinished – masterpiece *The Life of the Mind*. Arendt died in 1975, while she was writing it, and the book was published a few years later. In it, she would analyze the three basic functions of mental life, as she saw it: thinking, willing, and judging. However, she only made it through the first two functions, but this is also enough for a deep understanding of especially the life of thinking. One of the most important distinctions in the book is between thinking and knowing (Arendt, 1978, p. 14). The former has *meaning* as its goal, Arendt writes, while the latter has *cognition* as its goal. It is a somewhat specialized use of the concepts that is invoked here, but Arendt connects it to Kant’s distinction between reason and intellect. We obtain cognition, according to Kant, when sensory impressions are connected with concepts, and this is necessary in order for us to survive in the world. But thinking has meaning as its goal and is thus an activity performed for its own sake. For meaning has no goal beyond meaning.

Here Arendt is in line with Kant as well as with the Greeks. In many contexts we – like other animals – are preoccupied with useful activities that provide us with food, reproduction, and ensuring survival, but through theoretical thinking we manage to rise above these instrumental matters, which is deeply meaningful. Arendt notes the etymological connection between the word *theory*, which is derived from *theos*, i.e., the divine, from which also the word *theatron* (theater) comes. As gods in a theater, one can view the world when one is able to think and philosophize, and this is true happiness. Achieving this requires an exemplary way of life, which is at least momentarily freed from labor, production, and consumption. It was called

*schole agein* in Greek, and it is of course from this that we have the concept of school, which basically means free time.

This is where *Bildung* can take place: When ordinary instrumental agendas and opportunistic motives are abolished, one can freely and vividly engage in “non-cognitive thinking” (which is not a contradiction in terms for Arendt). This kind of thinking consists of the elements “admiration, confirmation and affirmation” (1978, p. 151) and thus promotes the formation of meaning itself. According to Arendt, all this is connected with the human capacity for speech. Thinking cannot exist without speech, as the activities of the mind become manifest through words. *Bildung* can only happen when, in the true sense of the word, we converse with each other and are not preoccupied with persuading them for the sake of winning. Speech allows us to disconnect our animal bonds to the useful and opportune and to exchange thoughts and ideas with no other goal than to create meaning.

However, speech can also be internal. It does not begin as such at first in our lives, as developmental psychology has demonstrated, for we necessarily acquire a language precisely in conversation with others. But once we have become speakers, we can also talk to ourselves. Arendt celebrates this as something wonderful when the inner dialogue leads people to new meaningful insights or simply revolves around treasured memories. She pays tribute to Socrates, who discovered that one can have a conversational relationship with oneself as well as with others, as he was famous for suddenly being able to fall into spells and seemingly be preoccupied with his own inner life for a long time. It was his famous *daimon* that showed up, which in Greek means fate, conscience, and the inner voice, after which he could turn back to the outer, active life in the company of others. Such Socratic thoughtfulness can be seen as Western philosophy’s version of the meditation practice of the East. Meditation has in modern times become mindfulness, a technique that can be learned in courses in personal development. But whereas mindfulness consists of being attentively present and simply registering the impressions one gets, Socratic thoughtfulness is a more active process where one enters in an engaged way with one’s mind. In a sense, mindfulness is about thinking and pondering less, while thoughtfulness is about thinking and pondering more.

## 4 In Conclusion

Thinking is an activity; it is a way of life. It is something that people have practiced and described since the ancient Greeks and which must be handed down across generations and taken up again in a process of *Bildung*. And Arendt believed that that tradition was unfortunately disappearing, just as our general awareness of the significance of the past is:

What has been lost is the continuity of the past as it seemed to be banded down from generation to generation, developing in the process its own consistency. The dismantling process has its own technique [...]. What you then are left with is still the past, but a fragmented past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation. (Arendt, 1978, p. 212)

Jaan Valsiner's whole intellectual life and work is proof that Arendt was too pessimistic. Thinking is still possible. Even today it is possible to build upon a past of earlier scholars, as Jaan Valsiner does (e.g., Valsiner, 2012), and develop one's own voice and thinking that enables colleagues and students to see the larger pictures of history. Thus, *Bildung* is still possible, at least in certain academic oases where Jaan Valsiner has created spaces for non-instrumental thinking and meaning making in the service of the human mind. In addition to his great works, this is in my view the most important lesson we should all learn from Jaan Valsiner.

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# The Self Inside of Us: Biologism, Internalization, Quantification, and Science



Martin Dege

## 1 Overture: May I Introduce Myself?

Hello, I am Martin, the author of this article. I am 6 foot 4 with a weight of 194 pounds. I sleep 6.5 hours per night (on average). I drink a little more than 400 ml of coffee per day. I work at the desk a lot; so I typically fall short of the 10,000 steps per day recommended by doctors. However, I run a 10k five times a week (on average) and usually stay below 5 min per kilometer. I have a pretty rigid regime that allows me to be productive and manage the day-to-day business with kids, a job, and creative work. All this becomes possible because I tend to measure all kinds of activities and think about them in numbers. I tend to interpret numbers in terms of “achievement”: If I manage to go for a run 6 or 7 days per week, I “feel” that I have achieved something. Less coffee also counts as an achievement; so does the correct amount of sleep. *It makes me feel good.* A gym session is endlessly more pleasing if my scores come out in the top 5 percent of my age group. A doctor’s checkup feels satisfying if the blood count shows positive parameters.

At the same time, I *know* that such measurements are either superficial or inaccurate, that sleep patterns are infinitely more complicated than what my smartwatch can measure. I am aware that my body’s interactions with the environment and my *Self* cannot be boiled down to a set of numbers measured by a set of sensors. Yet, I build my daily routines, at least to a certain extent, on the assumption that there is a connection between an inner *Self*—interiority—a biological body, and forms of quantifiable and measurable outputs. The question I want to explore in the following is why such connections make sense to (at least some of) us.

Jaen Valsiner offers the first clue when he discusses the relationship between qualities and quantities. Building on Ehrenfels’s (1890), he argues that human

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psychology takes place at the level of generalized Gestalt qualities. “Generalization,” in turn, describes the process of abstraction from concrete sensorimotor-semiotic processes. Generalization frees experience from its concrete time and space. It allows me to experience *similar qualities* that I can quantify and measure my performance—“quantities” in this understanding amount to nothing more than qualities of a higher order. What is more, since time is irreversible, I am faced with what Valsiner calls the *ecological necessity of abstraction* (Valsiner, 2012, p. 23) that allows me to face future uncertainty. I experience my determined past as comparable qualities: Every run is different qualitatively, yet I can measure them to arrive at a comparison according to specific aspects (time, speed, length, felt level of exhaustion, etc.). From these indicators, I can creatively envision my immediate and not so immediate future as healthy, capable, sportive, and so on. Valsiner calls this creative process of imagining the future based on a fixed past our “dependent independence” (Valsiner, 1997).

## 2 Quantifying the Self

The forerunners of self-measurement and improvement come together in the so-called quantified self movement. One of their early spokespersons is Dominic Basulto, who coined the term *datasexual* in 2012 already (Basulto, 2012): Datasexuals are obsessed with their data. They track just about every aspect of their lives and share their data with others. The datasexual comes across as Silicon Valley’s answer to the Brooklyn hipster and, as such, another indication that New York is losing the cultural battle to the California tech industry: The assumption is that data make us healthy, more true to our real selves, and, indeed, sexy. More data even more so: with everyone having a smartphone at hand, tracking almost every aspect of our lives is literally at the fingertips of everyone who can afford the tech gadgets.

Even before the emergence of the datasexual, tech-writer and journalist Gary Wolf published a manifesto in *The New York Times Magazine* (Wolf, 2010). Impressed with the advancement of technology such as miniaturization and an assumed constant increase in computer power as expressed in Moore’s law, Wolf praises the language of quantification: “We use numbers when we want to tune up a car, analyze a chemical reaction, predict the outcome of an election. We use numbers to optimize an assembly line.” For Wolf, the next step seems clear: “Why not use numbers on ourselves?” (Wolf, 2010).

The quantified self movement goes beyond earlier attempts at a direct quantification of human life. Computer geeks have quantified aspects of their lives ever since the 1980s. Before that, apologetics of a more healthy lifestyle hoped to find salvation in quantification: Horace Fletcher’s “Fletcherism: What it is: Or, How I became young at 60,” published in 1912, already is just one example. Francis Galton’s “pocket registrar” would be another (Kenna, 1964). These earlier attempts all rely on quantification as a means to a certain end: become or stay young, better your

time management, or improve the human genome. The quantified self movement goes beyond such clear means/ends distinctions. It aims at a double quantity: quantification of every aspect of life in huge quantities to achieve a new quality. The collection of data becomes an end in itself with the goal of universal measurement. Such measures would be mathematical by nature and, as such, algorithmically transformable. Every measure seems to add to the great sum of life itself, the universal *life energy* that reflects the *singularity* (Kurzweil, 2006). In the words of Wolf:

Although they [the self-trackers] may take up tracking with a specific question in mind, they continue because they believe their numbers hold secrets that they can't afford to ignore, including answers to questions they have not yet thought to ask. (Wolf, 2010)

Self-tracking for Wolf and others promises the final redemption of the enlightenment promise: an all-transcending knowledge of both ourselves and others on scientific and objective grounds. It is the final transformation of subjectivity—its scientification: We become our own objects of study and erase our subjective flaws with objective data. Subjectivity objectifies itself. Moreover, since everyone can potentially collect data about themselves via self-tracking in this logic, science becomes democratized simultaneously. Self-tracking becomes *our*<sup>1</sup> rebellion against machines, experts, and therapists: *We* reclaim the data that have been taken from *us* by social networks, doctors, politicians, and large-scale Internet companies; by looking outward to the cloud that stores our data, we simultaneously look inward, into our psyche in a quest to figure ourselves out.

Wolf and others embody a media-centric approach of clear-cut explanations. The assumption is that humans have always tried to understand more about themselves by objectifying knowledge. Four distinct developments radically improved that quest:

First, electronic sensors got smaller and better. Second, people started carrying powerful computing devices, typically disguised as mobile phones. Third, social media made it seem normal to share everything. And fourth, we began to get an inkling of the rise of a global superintelligence known as the cloud. (Wolf, 2010)

From such a perspective, self-tracking appears to be everything but problematic. While it might be difficult for some people to learn the truth about themselves—think of alcohol consumption, the effectiveness of work, sleep patterns, etc.—objective data are the first step to improve. It is the dream of revealing our interiority on an iPad: One fingertip reveals the true Self as a fixed, transcendental, and coherent entity—the numbers just add up. Thanks to the right kind of technology and the right kinds of algorithms, *we* can understand the story this true Self conveys.

With such a mindset, the idea that technology might not be our universal messiah does not quickly occur. Similarly, the idea that we might not want to know everything about ourselves (at least not in the form of supposedly objective numbers) has little room in such an ideology.

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<sup>1</sup>Our, We, I, Us, etc., in Italics, are meant to indicate a possible first-person standpoint without referring to the author specifically.

If we do not follow this kind of ideology and look at self-tracking—or in more general terms, at the idea of a unity of the Self achieved by quantitative measurement—from a more techno-structuralist point of view, the invention of electronic sensors, smartphones, social media, and cloud computing is not very telling. Instead, we would have to ask where the idea that numbers can tell us something about ourselves—and, more precisely, that the combination of different numbers might reveal our objective selves to our subjective consciousness comes from. How is it that such an idea comes along as plausible to at least some of us?

### 3 The Self, Energy, and Labor

My goal in the following is to show how the idea of a quantification of the Self rose to prominence in the wake of a particular understanding of science. Simultaneously I want to discuss how such a scientific-materialistic notion of the Self became intermingled with older concepts of *interiority*, eventually constituting the idea of an inner Self that can be explored, recognized in its true nature, and treated by us in right or wrong ways. The attempt is not to provide a full history of ideas of this shift in western thought; instead, I want to exemplify how the idea of the Self changed radically at a particular point in time that I identify in the second industrial revolution and that introduced a new concept of science. To do so, I will rely on the writings of Karl Marx and read him as a social theorist whose writings reflect the social changes during this time. Concretely, I want to advance three theses:

1. Quantification of the Self is reflected in Marx's analysis of capitalism.
2. Marx himself contributed to a theoretical shift in the understanding of what the "self" is.
3. Marx himself was caught in-between the two poles of a pre-industrial/pre-enlightenment and an enlightened/scientific Self.

The consequences of Marx's adoption of the scientific materialist notions of human embodiment paint a rather grim image at first: form-giving human labor becomes labor-power, at which point energy is transferred, but little more. Revolution becomes an act of structural inevitability rather than political will, a structural inevitability so strong that the meaning of human political will is erased. Moreover, alienation, reliant on a humanist notion of lost essence, becomes an impossible concept to explain for two reasons. First, there is nothing distinctive about the human essence that can be lost in the energeticist model. Second, there is no reliable position outside of the norms of an alienated world through which alienation can be diagnosed, let alone overcome.

Furthermore, a romanticist critique of this quantification proves reactionary, a by-product of the unfolding of capitalism. In a final note, I want to show that Marx offers a way out of this capitalist logic. Against such a grim interpretation of quantification, I will attempt to argue that Marx offers a dialectical critique of the concept of total quantification that can serve as a grounding for a relational understanding

of the Self as we can find them in critical psychology debates today (Bakhtin, 1982; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Gergen, 2009; Valsiner, 2015). Moreover, I want to show how Marx puts his hope into science—not science in the conventional sense but *Wissenschaft* as a continuous source for hope, a hope he shares with Jaan Valsiner (2012, 2014; Valsiner et al., 2016).

The writings of Karl Marx can roughly be divided into two phases: the scientific Marx of *Capital* and the humanist Marx of the *Grundrisse* (1857/58) and the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844).

The young Marx is largely influenced by G.W.F. Hegel and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 1807/2018). For Hegel, as for the young Marx, *objectification* is the essential feature of all living human activity. It involves the combination of human force and passive matter, while human force and passive matter remain qualitatively different in kind. Humans *produce* nature and elicit its implicit rationality. *We* make objects that bear the human imprint, and the fact that these objects are not only immediately available to use is the hallmark of “conscious life activity.” According to Marx, unlike animals, “man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom.” Human beings produce not only themselves but “the whole of nature [...] in accordance with the law of beauty” (Marx, 1978a, p. 76). For the young Marx, this objectification is not individual but social, a feature he describes via the concept of “species-being [Gattungswesen]” (Marx, 1978b, p. 262). He writes, “It is just in the working-up of the objective world, therefore, that man first really proves himself to be a *species being*. [...] [N]ature appears as his work and his reality.” He can, therefore, contemplate “himself in a world he himself has created” (Marx, 1978a, p. 76). It is not individual objectifications that transform the world in this way, but the transformations the human species as a whole brings about in a progressive humanization and spiritualization of the natural world. *I* recognize *myself* not only in my own creations but also in those of *my* fellows, whose objectifications *I* also recognize as exhibiting the same human spirit as *my* own. *I* only know what *I am* in *my* species-capacity insofar as *I am* integrated into a social world of human objectification.

Under conditions of capitalism, the young Marx realizes that *estrangement* or *alienation* takes the place of *objectification*. At this point, he parts ways with Hegel. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes:

*[In Capital], the emphasis comes to be placed not on the state of being objectified but on the state of being alienated, dispossessed, sold [Der Ton wird gelegt nicht auf das Vergegenständlichtsein, sondern das Entfremdet-Entäussert-, Veräussertsein]; on the condition that the monstrous objective power which social labour erected opposite itself as one of its moments belongs not to the worker, but to the personified conditions of production, i.e. to capital. To the extent that, from the standpoint of capital and wage labour, the creation of the objective body of activity happens in antithesis to the immediate labour capacity—that this process of objectification in fact appears as a process of dispossession from the standpoint of labour or as appropriation of alien labour from the standpoint of capital—to that extent, this twisting and inversion [Verdrehung und Verkehrung] is a real phenomenon, not a merely supposed one existing merely in the imagination of the workers and the capitalists. But obviously this process of inversion is a merely historical necessity [...] but in no way an absolute necessity of production. (Marx, 1978b, p. 292)*

And for the Marx of *Capital*, this mere historical necessity has, at least in the eyes of the workers, turned into an absolute: “The advance of capitalist production develops a working-class, which by education, tradition, habit, looks upon the conditions of that mode of production as self-evident laws of Nature” (Marx, 1867/1992, p. 899).

Such an absolute—or rather pseudo-absolute—requires a new form of analysis of the worker’s condition. Someone who grew up in alienation cannot be understood in the same terms as someone who has learned to contemplate “himself in a world he himself has created” (Marx, 1978a, p. 76).

The young Marx understands humans as distinctly different from nature. They are driven by a transcendental and metaphysic power, that is, spirit. They create themselves and their world by objectifying it in a collective process. The old Marx witnesses a human species that has already been transformed by capitalism; they follow a different ontology. In his bestselling book *Kraft und Stoff* [*Force and Matter*] published in 1855, Ludwig Büchner—the Gary Wolf of the time—quotes two of his famous contemporaries, the physicians Rudolf Virchow and Carlo Matteucci:

“Life,” says Virchow, “is just a special case of mechanics; it is the most complicated version of the former, the one that has the traditional laws of mechanics run their course under the most complicated and diverse circumstances; which means that the results stem from such a large chain of changes that we can only reconstruct them to their beginning with the most difficulty.” “The living organism,” says Professor Matteucci, “is a machine, like the steam or the electrical engine, i.e., a system in which the chemical similarities and namely the connections of oxygen with nutritional materials [Ernährungsmaterialien] continuously produces electricity and muscle power.” (Büchner, 1855/1867, pp. 230/231, my translation)

In Büchner’s depiction, human spirit has become one with nature, fully integrated with its internal operations: Not only the difference between human and animal is wiped out, everything, be it organic or inorganic matter, now rests on the same fundamental laws. Ideas like “spiritual” or “vital” forms of life are progressively eliminated from scientific usage. *Kraft* and *Stoff*—force and matter—are now the expressions of a singular entity: energy. Humans, nature, and machines all operate according to a single model: energetic flow. Energy can be converted from an inert material to heat, mechanical activity, and back again, a single and transcendental process that governs human life, nature, and *everything*.

After 1848 and influenced by the scientific materialists such as Ludwig Büchner and Hermann von Helmholtz, Marx begins to adopt a self-understanding as a scientist. This was indeed partially motivated by the vast (financial) success of writers such as Büchner, possibly combined with the hope of being accepted as a scholar in German academic circles. Anson Rabinbach, in his account of the changes in Germany after 1848, identifies a more general and politically motivated trend toward scientism:

Germany was [...] the classical land of “non-synchronicity,” of both extraordinary rapid economic and social progress, and virulent resistance to modernity. If the chorus of antiliberal and antimodern voices from Schopenhauer to Spengler was one familiar pole of that dialectic, the scientific materialists were surely the other, manifesting boundless optimism regarding the potential harmony of nature and industry [...] To the extent that liberalism

survived the political defeat of 1848, the traditions of German constitutionalism were largely preserved in its scientific, rather than political culture. In the absence of a liberal polity, German science became the most fertile terrain for the antireligious, antiautocratic, and democratic ideals that the post-1848 era extinguished in the public sphere. (Rabinbach, 1990, p. 49)

Amid this non-synchronicity, Marx's premises about the interaction between human beings and the natural world change. Already in the *Grundrisse*, Marx compares economic exchange with the functioning of the human body:

In the human body, as with capital, the different elements are not exchanged at the same rate of reproduction, blood renews itself more rapidly than muscle, muscle than bone, which in this respect may be regarded as the fixed capital of the human body. (Marx, 1857-8/1939/1973, p. 592)

Bones are not only firmer; they appear analogous to the enduring factory capital that lasts through multiple production cycles. As the machines of a factory, bones are the more durable parts of bodily life. Their production and maintenance require a more significant investment of energy than that required by other parts. The body is a mechanized production system. Its parts are replaced at differential rates, a system in full exchange with a natural environment from which it does not qualitatively differ.

Thinking about the body in this way is not only uncommon prior to capitalism; it is outright impossible. Under the paradigm of industrial production, however, the body is reconceived as a productive machine, and the contributions of this machine to the production process can be measured. Human freedom is not anymore achieved through (unalienated) labor but through a diminished need for human energetic work: The hope is that technological progress will allow *us* to one day merely attend *our* machines or even step aside entirely while the production process goes on, engaging *our* faculties in other ways and other settings, allowing “me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic” (Marx, 1978c, p. 160). For Marx, human freedom increasingly occurs in spare or leisure time rather than within the labor process itself. Freedom was not a function of objectifying the world anymore but of the conservation of life energy.

Hermann von Helmholtz became famous for his July 1847 lecture to the Physical Society of Berlin on *Über die Erhaltung der Kraft* [*About the Conservation of Force*] (Helmholtz, 1847/1889) in which he presented a version of the first law of thermodynamics, better known as the conservation of energy. This law insists that energy is at a constant level in the universe and is neither created nor destroyed; it merely changes form. Derived ultimately from the sun, energy is an inherent property of all matter. According to the new law, heat and motion are convertible, and *work* can be reduced to an amount of heat or motion performed.

The significance of this new *Weltbild* is striking: All of nature, all forms of life now consist of *conserved energy*. This conserved energy operates in a transcendental but not metaphysical way; it serves as the basis of all manifestations of matter

and force. In the new metaphysics, dignity is conferred upon the material world, which can no longer be conceived as hostile and resistant to spirit or as the ground for spiritualization by force.

According to the older metaphysics, forces began and ended in time. Forces also differed according to type: Human force was not the same as natural, divine, or mechanical force; animal, human, or machine forces were subject to different classification systems because they participated to differing degrees in spiritualization. Organic and inorganic bodies were thought to be composed of *qualitatively different kinds* of elements. Organic matter was distinguished by a vitalist principle that could not be further broken down into chemical or energetic components. Human life and action was the highest and most spiritual expression of this principle. The new, post-Helmholzian metaphysics binds together these objects under the unifying rubric of energy. Forces do not begin and end in time; rather, they are transformed into one another. Nature, society, and labor are similarly reconceived as transmutations and intensifications of energetic force. Their design must be regulated not only for maximal productivity with minimal loss of heat energy in unproductive expenditure but also to not precipitously wind down, wear out, or self-destruct.

Similarly, as Rabinbach (1990) argues, the new model transforms the notion of resistance to labor. Workers resist labor not out of laziness, a failure of the spirit or will, but out of a lack of energy, the loss of an inordinate amount of unrecompensed heat. Fatigue rather than willful resistance comes to be seen as the chief enemy of productive labor. Resistance to labor becomes a scientific problem, rather than a problem of moral. Marx himself is concerned with fatigue and, from the 1850s onward, begins to apply energeticist notions. The creation of such categories as *abstract labor* and *labor-power* is a direct consequence of Marx's engagement with thermodynamics. Alongside Marx's continued but increasingly ambiguous use of the *labor* concept, *labor-power* comes to distinguish the quantifiably measurable units of force added by workers to the production process and the quantifiably measurable units of force needed to supply workers with the basic life necessities (food, clothes, sleep, etc.). In his later work, Marx also uses the concept of labor-power to distinguish the margin of inequality between what workers give up to capital in the labor process and what they receive in the form of purchasing power.

Although Marx became famous for his definition of *labor-power* (*Arbeitskraft*), it was von Helmholtz who first introduces the term (Rabinbach, 1990, p. 46). Helmholtz extended the meaning of *Kraft*. Initially, the term described the forces unleashed by machines to convert chemical or heat energy into mechanical energy. Von Helmholtz expanded the meaning of *Kraft* to all of nature, including human labor. Labor, reconceived as part of the continuous fabric of energy, became *Arbeitskraft*, or *labor-power*. According to Rabinbach, this extension is crucial for the social and political conceptualization of labor, for through it, the concept of labor was distinctively modified. With the widespread success of the energeticist model, the "work performed by any mechanism, from the fingers of the hand to the gears of the engine, or the motion of the planets, was essentially the same. With this

semantic shift in the meaning of ‘work,’ all labor was reduced to its physical properties, devoid of content and inherent purpose. Work was universalized” (Rabinbach, 1990, p. 47).

Marx’s critique of the political economy becomes possible because the concept of labor on which Locke, Smith, and Hegel founded, respectively, autonomy, property, and subjectivity is irreparably changed. Instead of dignifying the human being and setting them at the apex of the universe, instead of spiritualizing nature via a human force different in kind, labor situates humans in continuity with nature and natural force.

## 4 The Self and Science

In the above section, I tried to show how quantifying the self/identity reaches as far back as the second industrial revolution. I wanted to show how the rise of the scientific materialists had direct consequences on how the relationship of humans to nature was construed. The Self as a form of energetic flow could be measured, optimized, and regulated if only the complex mechanics of that Self were to be understood. The translation of the Self from an entity different in kind to an element created from the same raw material as the rest of nature allows for the measurement of that Self: the quantification and optimization of energetic flow as we have seen with the quantified self movement.

However, the quantification of the Self as energetic flow does not seem to capture the entire picture. The energeticist model alone denigrates and demoralizes human prominence ideologically as well as materially. Humans become a calculable resource like any other within the economy. Büchner and von Helmholtz’s scientific materialism and its empiricist and positivist companions, with their proud inattention to conceptuality, metaphysics, or teleology in shaping human perceptions of scientific facts, offered such a framework.

Self-optimization relies on measurable quantities, often rendered in terms of *productivity*. Another aspect is, however, ignored if we rely on energeticist concepts alone. The quantified self movement, and beyond that the entire self-help industry, also touches upon notions of a *True Self* and of being more faithful to one’s Self, to who *I am*. Jaan Valsiner captures this thriving toward self-understanding in irreversible time with a double-layered concept of goal orientation that he bases on William Stern’s (1935) personality concept. Teleologic orientations offer externally guided development, while teleogenetic orientations resemble self-guided development: setting future goals and acting toward attaining them (Valsiner, 1999, 2014, p. 38f).

It appears that the energeticist model is paralleled by an understanding of an authentic self that is much closer to the young Marx and the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* than the post scientific materialism models. Both models share the interiority of the Self; the idea that these processes happen inside of us and that we have to look inside to understand ourselves.

Marx seems to have known this. Despite his claims to have eliminated noncapitalist concepts in *Capital* and given an account of the capitalist mode of production and its overcoming *from within* this conceptual closure, Marx continually relies on claims of an *authentic human essence* that the capitalist scientific worldview claimed to have erased. In particular, he appeals to the term *human*. This term appears as a marker for labor, the free play of the faculty of imagination beyond material determination, and incitement to moral indignation. Marx also appeals to *use-value*, the inherent worth of a thing that serves as the regulative ideal of exchange.

It appears that the energeticist ideology and its scientific materialist counterpart struggle to eliminate the meaningfulness of these concepts by ostensibly quantifying everything in terms of everything else. Yet, as Valsiner shows us in his discussion of Hegel's dialectic of Self and Other (Valsiner, 2012; Dege, 2013), such attempts are doomed to fail. He writes: "Quantity is not a given entity but a construct that emerges on the basis of the quality. It belongs to the quality" (Valsiner, 2012, p. 93). Quantity, Valsiner argues, is nothing but the *quality of magnitude*.

It is tempting to be critical of Marx—and, as a consequence, Valsiner—for rehearsing a nostalgic and antiquated humanism derived from the classical and feudal periods, a humanism that relied on the notion of an authentic human essence that was lost under the conditions of the modern capitalist world. In *Capital*, Marx seems to rely on a historically deracinated, feudal, or even classical notion of human essence as a foil for the degraded human essence characteristic of the capitalist model.

If this form were an anachronistic humanism characteristic of Marx's thinking, then his normative vision of unalienated labor would be a call to return to the purity of these lost historical essences. His thought would be a version of romanticism. Insofar as Marx's thought was determined by the theme of purity and its political corollary—a revolution to end all revolutions and restore this lost human essence—he could even be read as a reactionary. His thought would be nostalgic, perhaps even reflect a dangerous nostalgia, for a concept of the human forged by and in the norms of an unequal world.

However, if we read carefully, we find that Marx does not express this uncritical longing for the features of the precapitalist world or the forms of humanity inaugurated. Though critical of capitalism, Marx never retreats from the insight that bourgeois revolutions were emancipatory improvements of the human condition, significant steps forward: indeed, the greatest possible steps "within the hitherto existing world order," even if they were not "the final forms of human emancipation" (Marx, 1844) that would be present in some possible world. Nor does Marx retreat from an account of all nature, including human nature, as essentially historical: shaped by material conditions and the resultant capacities of human knowing and action.

On another reading, we could argue that perhaps the romantic features of this humanism, like the scientific materialism with which they all-too-readily contrast, are a product of the capitalist world and not merely an importation from the explanatory systems of earlier, obsolete worldviews. In this interpretation, it would be the

ideology of capitalism, not Marx, that produces a reactionary and romantic humanist nostalgia for the feudal world. In this interpretation, nineteenth-century romantic humanism is not merely a prolonged survival of the systems of thought that characterized an earlier historical period. Instead, it is one of the disavowed products of capitalism itself—a capitalist humanism. Marx's use of this humanism, like his use of scientific materialism, would then be a performance: a performance designed to show that capitalist ideology cannot account for its own activity without recourse to humanistic notions that it supposedly banishes.

From this point of view, it appears that Marx cannot offer a solution either for the dehumanization by quantification or the subsequent pseudo-rehumanization in the process of interiorization. Quite the contrary, he makes the situation worse. Quantification/scientification functions in service of capitalism: It makes comparison possible and ultimately attaches exchange-value to everything. The pseudo-rehumanization, that is, the appeal to a new quality of Knowing Thyself once the true Self is found, adds up to nothing more than the necessary opponent in the dialectic: a reactionary and nostalgic humanism created by capitalist ideology.

I would like to offer yet another interpretation. It seems that Marx does offer a way out. And somewhat surprisingly, this exit is *science*. Not the science of positivism and empiricism that is strongly connected to quantification, the energeticist model, and the scientific materialists but science in Hegelian terms: *Wissenschaft*. That is attention to the role of available concepts in shaping scientific inquiry. Historicizing Hegel, Marx offers a genealogy of the concepts used in scientific inquiry and finds these concepts to be shaped by the materialist world. When Marx claimed that *Capital* was *scientific*, he meant it in two ways. *Capital* is scientific in a narrow sense because it proves that the resource use of the capitalist system is unsustainable in quantifiable terms. For example, the profit rate fall argues that profit cannot sustain itself at increasingly high levels as the capitalist system continues to develop. More importantly, *Capital* is scientific in a broad sense because it identifies the concepts with which the capitalist world, including capitalist science, operates. These are the abstractions of the commodity, wage labor, value, the individualized *homo economicus*, the systems of exchange these constructs presuppose, and a medical physiology that assimilates humans, animals, and machines to a single model. Marx disagreed with the ultimate quantification of the human experience operative in these concepts. Hence, in the broad sense, he wished to use science to show the underpinnings of how science, in the narrow sense, operates in the capitalist world. He believed that part of science's task is to account for the lineage of the concepts with which it operates. Science, in the narrow sense, has failed to account for its conceptual presuppositions. As such, it suffers from an alienated epistemology. Science in the brought sense always includes the presuppositions upon which certain (technological) developments rest. Thus, it is political in a strong sense: open to debate and open for different directions of development. Psychology as a comparatively young discipline—a discipline that is, in many ways, the product of political decisions rather than academic contemplation—might be at the *Doorstep of a New Beginning* if it manages to “avoid the distorted mirrors through which it looks at itself” (Valsiner, 2012, pp. 280–281).

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# Valsiner and Van der Veer: A Case of Intellectual Interdependency



Rene van der Veer

Historians of science have so far been unable to establish when Valsiner and van der Veer first met, but it must have been in the remote past, probably in the mid-1980s. Planes and trains already existed; personal computers, the Internet, and cell phones did not. Given Valsiner's addiction to international travel, the young and still handsome researchers most likely met in Amsterdam, the erstwhile capital of drugs and prostitution, where van der Veer lived at the time. It is unclear what caused their first encounter. Probably, one of them sent the other a card asking for the reprint of an article, but this cannot be established with any degree of certainty.

In general, it is now quite difficult to understand how transatlantic communication between scientists took place in those distant times. Possibly, people were still writing and dispatching letters like in the older times, or perhaps prehistoric forerunners of email already existed at universities. Be that as it may, the former decathlete and the former middle-distance runner turned out to have many interests in common and soon engaged in lively conversations and plans for future joint research projects. At the time, van der Veer had published a book on "critical psychology" (Van IJzendoorn & van der Veer, 1984) in English and a monography about the Russian pedologist Vygotsky in the local dialect (Van der Veer, 1985). Valsiner was writing about almost anything and had presumably already prepared parts of his excellent book on Soviet developmental psychology (Valsiner, 1988).

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## 1 Joint Book Projects

It is probably fair to say that the history and theory of Soviet psychology belonged to Valsiner and van der Veer's first joint research interests. Van der Veer had frequently visited the Soviet Union to find information for his book on Vygotsky and was baffled by the local circumstances and customs. Valsiner miraculously escaped from that socialist paradise and had intimate knowledge about the various schools of Soviet psychology and Soviet society. After some tryouts in the form of joint articles (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1987, 1988, 1989; Valsiner & van der Veer, 1988), the two researchers decided it was time for a far more ambitious project: a lengthy book about the historical Vygotsky that situated his ideas in the philosophies, ideologies, and theories of his time.

Writing such a book was not an easy task. Various interesting books on Vygotsky's ideas had already been written (Kozulin, 1984, 1990; Wertsch, 1985), but none of them had the focus that Valsiner and van der Veer had in mind. Vygotsky's original writings were difficult to get by, and republications were either heavily abridged (Vygotsky, 1962), formed a curious compilation (Cole et al., 1978), or were largely unreliable in other ways (the *Collected Works* published in Russian from 1982 to 1984). Fortunately, repeated visits to Moscow, valuable help by Vygotsky's daughter Gita Lvovnaya, and sustained searches in many Western libraries proved successful and, in the end, a sizable list of historical writings enabled the writers to begin their reconstruction of Vygotsky's synthetic efforts.

The resulting book, *Understanding Vygotsky: A quest for synthesis* (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) was well received by the critics (Brozhek, 1993; Bryant, 1993; Desforges, 1993; Kozulin, 1993; Netchine & Netchine-Grynberg, 1994; Pufall, 1992; Ratner, 1993; Smith, 1993; Tryphon, 1995; Youniss, 1994) and is still being cited, and possibly even read, by modern researchers who invoke Vygotsky's ideas.<sup>1</sup> With hindsight, the book was remarkable in that it stressed the fact that Vygotsky relied heavily on his predecessors and contemporaries to construct his own theory of the human mind. Vygotsky was not "a visitor from the future" (Jerome Bruner), nor a researcher whose ideas were "ahead of our time" (Norris Minnick) but a very bright scholar who operated within the constraints of his cultural, social, and political environment. Various chapters of the book sought to demonstrate the interconnectedness of Vygotsky's ideas with those of his contemporaries. A chapter on Gestalt psychology, for example, showed how Vygotsky used the non-reductionist ideas of Köhler, Lewin, Koffka, and Goldstein and at the same time resisted their non-dialectical approach to human development. It is only recently that the link between Vygotsky's theorizing and the ideas advanced by Gestalt psychologists has received new attention in several writings by Yasnitsky (cf. Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016). Another chapter that introduced a new perspective to the existing view of Vygotsky focused on his historical role within the discipline of Russian child

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<sup>1</sup>At the moment of writing this contribution, the English and Brazilian (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1996) editions together had been cited approximately 2550 times.

studies or pedology. Throughout his career, Vygotsky worked in the discipline of pedology, and many of his writings can only be understood against the background of this now extinct science and its role in the Soviet educational system. As the authors argued, pedology allowed Vygotsky to combine the study of the development of novel complex functions with that of the educational needs of normal and retarded children (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 327). The focus on pedology was quite novel at the time, and it is only recently that Byford has deepened the study of the history of this discipline in several excellent publications (e.g., Byford, 2014, 2016, 2021; cf. van der Veer, 2020). All in all, *Understanding Vygotsky* asked the reader to consider the links between Vygotsky's ideas and the web of other ideas available to him in order to understand his intellectual creativity in its historical context.

For the authors, writing the book about a previously little known Russian pedologist once again taught them how immensely interesting and rewarding it can be to read the older psychological authors (e.g., Baldwin, Bühler, Hall, James, Janet, Köhler, Pavlov, Piaget, Stern, Watson), and I think it is fair to say that researching Vygotsky's legacy encouraged them to continue studying psychology's history. In this sense, the Vygotsky book laid the foundation for the much later book on the social mind.

However, the authors were not yet done with Vygotsky and decided that it was high time to provide the Western reader with a collection of reliable writings by the Russian researcher. This resulted in their *Vygotsky reader* (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994), which was well received by the reviewers (Guldberg, 1995; Lankshear, 1995; Lunt, 1995; McCrone, 1994) and is still being cited by colleagues.<sup>2</sup> Again the authors sought to change the existing image of Vygotsky by selecting writings that highlighted unknown facets of his creativity. The chapters on the socialist alteration of man and on fascism in psychoneurology, for example, showed that Vygotsky subscribed to the ideology of his time and was not at all working in a political vacuum. But most important, probably, except for the excellent translation of the little-known writings by Theresa Prout, was the fact that the editors managed to find many of the sources to which Vygotsky referred and thus again allowed the readers to situate Vygotsky in the scientific playfield of his time. As Boring (1950, p. ix) wrote more than 70 years ago, "without such knowledge... [the researcher] mistakes old facts and old views for new, and he remains unable to evaluate the significance of new movements and methods."

In that same year 1994, the authors also edited a quite different volume. This was the book *Reconstructing the Mind: Replicability in Research on Human Development* (Van der Veer et al., 1994; cf. Matusov, 1996). The book emphasized the need for replication in the social sciences and discussed the various forms of replication and their positive sides and potential drawbacks. In addition, the methods of replication were discussed, and various examples of actual replications were presented in some detail. Interestingly, the volume drew little attention at the time and has been cited

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<sup>2</sup>At the time of writing, it had been cited almost 900 times.

only a handful of times. It is possible that *Reconstructing the Mind* was published just too early: the interest in replicability in empirical research boomed two or three decades later (e.g., Zwaan et al., 2018), and it is only now generally accepted that reproducibility of results is a crucial factor in research practice. Despite its lack of immediate success, editing the book was a most interesting experience for Valsiner and van der Veer, who several years after its appearance gave a joint course on replicability in Tartu, Estonia, which may have left a lasting impression on some of the students, because one of the professors used to arrive in the lecture hall on inline skates.

The avid and addictive reading of historical sources by both Valsiner and van der Veer almost inevitably led to a new major book: After all, how can one, day in day out, read the most interesting and entertaining articles and books in French, German, Russian, English, etc. without giving in to the urgent impulse to share their treasures with colleagues and friends? That would be most egoistic and egoism is not a vice the authors wish to be accused of. It has been written that the seed for the book emerged in now long-forgotten quasi-Russian “kitchen talks” in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and that it matured for almost 15 years. That is difficult to prove, of course, but what seems sure is that Valsiner’s boundless curiosity and his chronic graphomania played a decisive role in designing and writing a book, which by its sheer volume—almost 500 pages—could equally well serve as a presse-papier. I am, of course, talking about *The Social Mind: Construction of the Idea* (Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; cf. Burr, 2001; Van Oers, 2002), which appeared in 2000 and has since the date of its appearance been regularly cited by colleagues.<sup>3</sup> It was a voluminous book indeed: in nine long chapters, the authors discussed intellectual interdependency, social suggestion, Pierre Janet, James Mark Baldwin, American pragmatism, George Herbert Mead, European holistic psychology, Lev Vygotsky, and modern theories about the social mind.

It is almost impossible to summarize the book in a few lines or paragraphs, and I will make no attempt to do so and just make a few remarks. What can be said is that the idea of the social nature of the human mind was always quite prevalent in psychological, psychiatric, and sociological writings. In the late nineteenth century, for example, experts wondered whether persons could be suggested to commit a crime under hypnosis and whether in such a case they could be held accountable for their deeds. Other thinkers (e.g., Baldwin, Elias, Mead, Janet, Vygotsky) suggested that the individual mind somehow emerges by introjecting social laws and cultural phenomena and scripts and thereby is originally and fundamentally social. Even our most intimate behavior and our most private thoughts are bound by social rules and examples we first encountered in social interaction, books, films, or the Internet. The unique combination of social imitations and borrowings makes it possible to speak of individual minds, which nevertheless are thoroughly social.

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<sup>3</sup>More than a 1000 times, to be precise.

## 2 Conclusions

Since the mid-1980s, Valsiner and van der Veer, while drinking gallons of milk and consuming impressive portions of the now almost extinct eel, have jointly contributed some 20 publications to the psychological literature, some of which were frequently cited by colleagues, while others were virtually ignored. Historians of science have wondered how these writings came into being and who contributed what to specific publications. However, the point of many of Valsiner and van der Veer's writings is that such questions are by definition impossible to answer: it is exactly the issue of intellectual interdependency that makes it impossible to say where the one ends and the other begins in their joint writings. The only thing that can be established with any degree of certainty is that they immensely enjoyed their transatlantic cooperation.

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**Part II**  
**Developmental Science in the Making**

# The Dynamics of Agency and Context in Human Development: Holism Revisited



Nancy Budwig

Recent work in the developmental sciences has highlighted the importance of considering metatheoretical paradigms guiding such work, noting increasing momentum for what has been referred to as the relational- developmental paradigm (Budwig & Alexander, 2021; Overton, 2015; Witherington, Overton, Lickliter, Marshall, & Narvaez, 2018). After a long period of the Cartesian split-mechanistic view of human development, we have increasingly witnessed a shift to more relational views. Moving beyond the separation of mind from body, organism from context, and linear accounts of human development based on additive models (all characteristic of the Cartesian split-mechanistic metatheory), the relational- developmental paradigm embraces three key factors:

1. The role of the organism in their own development (agency).
2. The dynamic and unique patterns of human development across historical and ontogenetic time are central (process).
3. A holistic view of human development that emphasizes the importance of studying the organism as a system, including between the organism and environment (holism).

It is this third area, the holistic view of the organism and environment, that is the central focus of this chapter.

There is momentum in the developmental sciences for the view that organisms cannot be studied as a series of disconnected parts (Valsiner, 1998; Valsiner and Diriwechter, 2008). One example of the bidirectional relations between parts and wholes is put forth by Overton (2010, p. 13): “Holistically, the whole is not an aggregate of discrete elements but an organized system of parts, each part being defined by its relations to other parts and to the whole.”

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Any attempt to examine only one part of a larger whole will fail if a systems approach is not adopted. For instance, one must look at levels of analysis rather than separating out in disconnected ways the study of an individual organism's cognitive, social, and communicative development (Budwig, Turiel, & Zelazo, 2017).

While a number of theoretical accounts have argued for the centrality of holism, the specific relationships between individual and culture in such accounts are unclear and much confusion exists. For instance, some have claimed that Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model falls short of adequately accounting for holism, while others say he was misunderstood (Tudge et al., 2009). Similar misunderstandings have been attributed to sociocultural accounts of individual and culture relations implying culture determines individual development, rather than being bidirectional (Mistry & Dutta, 2015).

In this chapter, we will look more closely at three approaches to individual and environment relations in discussions of holism in developmental science, with a focus on two questions. First, how does each account describe individual, culture, and their relationship to one another (*the what*); and second, how specifically does that interaction take place (*the how*)? After reviewing Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model, developmental systems theory, and sociocultural approaches, a discussion will examine how historical changes in the notion of context in neighboring disciplines will help developmental scholars move forward in productive ways as scholars embrace more holistic views of human development.

## 1 Three Views on the Relation Between Individual and Culture in Holistic Views of Development

### *Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model*

Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach to human development spanned several decades and phases. The version most often discussed, and presented in textbooks, examines four different aspects of what Bronfenbrenner described as the environmental context. The microsystem refers to relations between the individual and those in the proximate surroundings (e.g., home, school, work). The mesosystem contains interrelationships between microsystems such as home and school, peer and school, etc. The third level is called the exosystem—structures such as public agencies or the media that are not thought to interact directly with the individual, but are said to impinge upon microsystems in ways that impact development; and the outermost level is the macro-system, which refers to the norms and cultural beliefs that guide how other levels function. Each of the four levels is portrayed as essentially important, but it is also noted that the four levels function as a system that influenced the individual's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Some have compared this view of the individual-environment role as similar to that of cross-cultural psychologists who view culture as an entity external to the

individual with “out there” qualities. For instance, Mistry and Dutti (2015 p. 370) argue:

Culture is represented as the outermost layer of context or macro-system. Although this model has conceptually focused on the interplay among the various layers of the context (i.e., psychological, biological, cultural, historical, institutional), empirically, the specific layers have been treated as split-off independent variables that influence behavior and development as efficient causes. Thus, culture is conceptualized as a feature of environmental or ecological context that exists independent of the person.

Tudge et al. (2009, 2016) remind us that it is important to note first that Bronfenbrenner’s model changed over time and, second, whether taking into account early or later versions, the discussion of it as a mechanistic approach is misinterpreted. As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006, p. 795) summarize:

We begin with an exposition of the defining properties of the model, which involves four principal components and the dynamic, interactive relationships among them. The first of these, which constitutes the core of the model, is Process. More specifically, this construct encompasses particular forms of interaction between organism and environment, called proximal processes, that operate over time and are posited as the primary mechanisms producing human development. However, the power of such processes to influence development is presumed, and shown, to vary substantially as a function of the characteristics of the developing Person, of the immediate and more remote environmental contexts, and the time periods, in which the proximal processes take place.

As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006, p.799) themselves acknowledge, the later versions of the model go much further not only in adding new constructs (e.g., the concept of proximal process including the addition of time) but also in describing human development as “bidirectional, synergistic interrelationships.” Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) highlight the power of proximal processes playing a major role in development, noting that variations in characteristics of both individuals and context, as well as space and time, can lead to different developmental outcomes. The model appears to fit with the relational- developmental paradigm to the extent that agency, process, and holism are all central and defining features. Organisms and environments are distinct, but both mutually play a role in development, similar to what Valsiner (2001) refers to as inclusive separation. As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006, p. 815) suggest:

Not only do developmentally generative features of the surroundings have greater impact in more stable settings, but they also function as a buffer against the disruptive influences of disorganizing environments.

This framing begins to take up Valsiner’s (1997, 2014) notion of inclusive separation which attempts to look at the catalytic relationship between individual and environment. Note though that the bioecological model adopts what Valsiner (2014, p. 70) refers to as a causal influence, rather than that articulated in his construct of inclusive separation, which describes the process of internalization/externalization as involving:

A sequence of boundaries that distance the internal personal infinity with that of the outer world. This language use is intentional—distancing within the context (rather than from it)

entails the dialogical unity designated by inclusive separation—a boundary creates a relationship between the two sides distinguished by it.

The distinction is critical because it shows that one can adopt a holistic systems view that stipulates distinct conditions that are said to cause (in the bioecological model) or enable the organism in its relations with the environment:

Different layers of the internalization/externalization system—are structural units that separate and unite the system at the same time. The critical role played in this act of inclusive separation is that of catalytic conditions that are bound to the different locations on these borders. These conditions *enable*—rather than cause—the self-regulatory functioning of the organism in its relations with the surrounding world. It is the catalytic functions that dominate in the organization of the meaning-making process. (Valsiner, 2014, p. 90)

### *Developmental Systems Theory*

A set of articles synthesizing a tremendous amount of work in the developmental sciences from a developmental systems theory perspective (Ford & Lerner, 1992; Overton, 2015) examines malleability, plasticity, and individuality of children’s learning and development in context (Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2020; Cantor, Osher, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, T., 2019). Borrowing from Fischer and Bidell (2006) the metaphor of a “constructive web,” these articles aim to understand “the dynamic interrelationships between children’s development, knowledge, complex skill construction, and environmental supports” (Cantor, Osher, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2019, p. 316). Developmental systems theory (DST) is noted to provide a framework that allows scholars to understand the various factors of both the individual and their environments that work together as children develop across longitudinal time. Adopting “a dynamic, holistic developmental systems framework ... enables a deeper understanding of the whole child in context” (Cantor et al. 2019, p. 327). Following others (Fischer & Bidell, 2006; Oyama, 2000), the authors note that adopting the dynamic systems framework allows the researchers to move beyond both genetically predetermined and nature vs. nurture alternatives. The DST framework proposed here is noted to relate to Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological framework. What specifically by culture and context in this framework, and how culture and context link up with individual function within the developmental systems paradigm, is a central question to which we now turn.

Culture does not figure much in the DST framework, though notions such as context and ecological systems do. As we will see more clearly in the next section, the developmental systems framework assumes both flexibility and agency on the part of the individual as individuals construct meaning out of experiences in much the way others have described (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Overton & Mueller, 2012). While noting terms such as embodiment and socially and culturally situated development, little more is said about these aspects, and it is not clear what Osher et al. (2020, p.1) mean by these terms:

The framework enables us to view children's development as embodied, contextualized, and socially and culturally situated, which is understood in their ecologies and affected by the ecologies of those who interact with them.

More central to the DST perspective are what are called two drivers of human development, namely, relationships and context. Specifically, relationships, micro- and macro-contextual factors, and cultural and structural factors are said to support or undermine healthy development (e.g., institutionalized racism, poverty). Relationships include the key actors who affect development (e.g., parents, peers, teachers), as well as contexts within which development takes place (e.g., families, schools). While the individual is said to be active, much of the terminology used by Osher et al. (2020, p. 1) to describe the process of development suggests that it is the "influences of key contexts and relationships within contexts in young people's lives that drive their development over time, and address growth and malleability throughout the life course."

As a constructive web (Fischer & Bidell, 2006), Cantor et al. (2019) describe the individual as an agent of their development drawing on the contextual supports that positively or negatively influence their development. The specific developmental trajectory is imagined as unique, produced jointly from individuals' cognitive and affective attributes and the dynamic web of contextual supports surrounding him/her over time (Fischer & Bidell, 2006; Lerner, 2018; Rose et al., 2013). In addition to contexts, Cantor et al. (2020, p. 3) claim that relationships play a central role: "Relationships between and among children and adults are a primary process through which biological and contextual factors influence and mutually reinforce each other."

Those adopting a DST perspective argue that individuals develop in context and propose that ignoring contextual factors would inaccurately portray the process of development. Furthermore, while the focus on micro- and macro-contexts and relationships might suggest that development depends solely on specific interactions, the idea is put forth that there can be intergenerational transmission, both positive (assets) and negative (adversity), that cumulatively ripple within and between generations (Osher et al., 2020, p. 15).

While the notion of context is similar to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological models, the developmental systems framework focuses more on the role of relationships with others and highlights to a slightly larger extent the complexity of interaction between nature and nurture and the role internalization plays in leading to a diversity of outcomes across historical time and place, as well as individuals. The organism is described by Osher et al. (2020, p. 18) as "continuously adapting, organizing, and reorganizing, and subject to change across the lifespan." As Valsiner notes (2005) in his discussion of the importance of the shift to examine processes of development within the dynamic systems model, the theory has moved the field of developmental science forward by emphasizing the level of organization of organism relating to environment exemplifying the dynamics of the system. Nevertheless, as he notes, this work has primarily been descriptive and has yet to explain the specifics of the active role of the self. "The formal notion of attractors has been

descriptive of dynamic processes, rather than explicative of their generation” (Valsiner, 2005, p. 13). Developmental systems theories offer a more holistic approach to development, which examine the dynamics at the level of the system, but DST has yet to establish how the dynamic organization is constructed as development unfolds.

### *Sociocultural Perspectives*

It is interesting that sociocultural approaches have received little attention within the discussion of the relational- developmental paradigm. As Stetsenko (2016) has noted, this may in part be due to early reports suggesting that Vygotskian theory should be viewed within a Marxist “split” tradition where cultural mediation was said to be distinct from individual agency (Overton, 2006). A careful review of Vygotskian and neo-Vygotskian positions including both sociogenetic and sociocultural approaches though suggests more transformative views of development in contrast to descriptions that view sociocultural perspectives as simple transmission models (Lawrence & Valsiner, 1993; Mistry & Wu, 2010). For those adopting a sociocultural framework, culture is not directly internalized, and individuals are actively involved in meaning-making processes. So the question can be raised: Is the view of individual-culture relations in sociocultural accounts similar to the bioecological and DST perspectives reviewed above? We turn to this now.

According to sociocultural views, culture and individual interactions are central to development, and these interactions are mediated by symbols and artifacts (Lawrence and Valsiner, 2003). Here the individual is not viewed as being nested within culture (e.g., it is not like a flower in a vase, where the vase supports the flower), but rather the perspective here focuses on ways personal sense making and sociocultural meanings indicate bidirectional support and reciprocal change (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003; Valsiner, 1998; Saxe, 2012). Interactions with others, including more experienced others and peers, play a central role in development, as does the notion of social infrastructure (Bielaczyc, 2006).

Particularly rich examples of the dynamics of both developmental and cultural change can be found in longitudinal fieldwork in Mexico and New Guinea over extensive periods of historical time. Such work, with successive waves of data collected at the same field sites, illustrates not only how the children develop but also ways in which the communities studied simultaneously participated in significant socio-historical changes (Greenfield, Maynard, & Childs, 2000; Saxe, 2012). This illustrates that in accounting for human development, it is not as if the organism is developing *in* culture. The sociocultural approach makes clear that cultures also evolve, and even within cultural communities, rich variation exists.

While both the bioecological and DST emphasize that development depends on bidirectional relationships, through a discussion of the role of artifacts and tools, sociocultural theorists identify *how* particular relationships and interactions are transacted (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee, 2006). Artifacts

and tools provide a major way to better understand how culture and individual meaning-making transform human development at multiple timescales (historical, ontogenetic, microgenetic). Just as tools and artifacts structure the cultural and individual development of mathematics in Saxe's sociogenetic work, others have highlighted the centrality of language as a symbolic tool, playing a role in both the development of thought and socialization (Budwig, 2003a; Wertsch, 1998). Humans interact in and through goal-directed activities involving tools. Culture does not exist separate as a ready-made dimension of experience, nor does context. A child, for instance, hears regular form-function patterns in language that are imbued with cultural meaning in the context of everyday interactions, which become tools for individual children's own meaning-making systems (Budwig, 2003b).

Two points are central to claims about the role of tools and artifacts. First, much evidence exists of children using language and other cultural tools and artifacts in unique ways based on their own personal meaning systems, showing their active role in meaning-making. Second, over time, studies have shown how cultures themselves transform and use tools and artifacts in evolving ways. Although much of the critique of Vygotsky's notion of zone of proximal development is based on the examination of specific goal-directed behaviors involving the use of ready-made tools and artifacts, it is important to note that typically tools and artifacts are not static, which makes them especially powerful contributors to the transformative process of cultures (Rosa, 2018). Tools and artifacts also provide methods for individuals to guide their own actions without others being involved directly. That is, humans develop tools to contextualize culturally relevant meanings. Gumperz (1982, 1992) refers to contextual cue-specific symbolic means that when used systematically come to stand for or index larger meaning systems, often without direct reference. For instance, shifting from formal titles to less formal titles in an ongoing interaction marks a new level of intimacy between interactants. As Gumperz argued, context is not fixed or out there, but is embodied and emerges in and through semantically mediated interactions. In this sense, contextual cues contribute to participants understanding of everyday interactions.

Sociocultural perspectives also have highlighted the importance of considering social infrastructure. Bielaczyc (2006) describes several dimensions of what she refers to as the social infrastructure framework (e.g., cultural beliefs, cultural practices, spatial relations) that can be useful to consider when thinking about holism and individual-culture bidirectional relations. The beliefs individuals have about individuality, agency, development, and norms develop in and through practices and the organization of spatial relationships. For instance, Rogoff, Moore, Correa-Chavez, and Dexter (2007, p.472) highlight the dynamics of interactions arguing:

People actively develop their individual histories, identifications, and resulting interests and familiarity with multiple cultural traditions, and the traditions themselves change as successive generations adapt them to current circumstances.

What is central about work such as that by Rogoff and colleagues, as well as other sociocultural scholars, is the importance of considering what is often left tacit, namely, that individual and cultural expectations about how events are organized

continually evolve, as individuals jointly participate in actual interactions. Members of different communities organize and structure activities with others in culturally different ways, and individuals develop repertoires of interaction based on experiences they participate in.

Whether tacit or explicit, Bielaczyc (2006) suggests that spatial relations contribute to and are guided by other aspects of social infrastructure. As Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) note, environments can be open to or discourage exploration by children. As Bielaczyc (2006), Rogoff (2003, Rogoff et al., 2007), and Valsiner (2000) have shown, the special configurations are not only constitutive of, but also built upon, cultural beliefs. As cultural notions change over time, so too do spatial configurations. For instance, as collaboration has become a desirable twenty-first-century learning outcome, spatial configurations in modern classrooms come to support collaborative learning with new furniture and spatial positioning of furniture developed to support collaboration, compared to spatial arrangements where students work independently at desks in rows with a teacher at the head of the class. In summary, spatial configurations can act as semiotic means of constructing how individuals experience physical space.

Pulling together a wide range of symbolic means, sociocultural perspectives argue that these systems (language, participant structures, artifacts, tools, spatial configurations) contribute to the bidirectional relationships between individuals and cultures. Meaning is not fixed, either culturally or individually, but rather mutually constituted in actual interactions.

## 2 Discussion

A careful review of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological approach, developmental systems theory, and sociocultural perspectives all show evidence of adopting a view of holism that aims to support an understanding of both organism and environment dynamically impacting development. But as Lawrence and Valsiner (1993, pp. 150–151) argue:

It is not sufficient to make repetitive declarations that psychological development is socially constituted. Instead, there is a pressing need to make it conceptually clear in what ways the social determinacy of human psychological functions is at work in the course of development.

In terms of conceptually clarifying how organism and culture play out in dynamic ways is something we argued the sociocultural perspective has elaborated on more than the other frameworks. Interestingly, in discussions of relational- developmental theorizing, this perspective is not given much treatment, nor have socioculturalists themselves been active in discussions related to the growing momentum for relational- developmental approaches.

### ***Evolving Notions of Context: A Look to Other Fields***

The patterns we have seen with regard to holism are remindful of those discussed several decades ago as the notion of context and the holistic relationship between language, thought, and culture were examined in neighboring fields (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Gumperz and Levinson, 1996). After a long while of viewing language separately from contexts of use, there began to be calls to consider bidirectional relations between notions of language and context. A phase similar to that of early Bronfenbrenner of a nesting of an individual's language was noted to require examinations of that linguistic behavior, in light of contexts of use. Context here was something existing independent from the symbolic activities of interactants. This view for the need to examine language *in* context, while well-received and important, was replaced by a more dynamic and embodied view of context. Meaning was not determined by virtue of being uttered in a particular context; rather, verbal and non-verbal forms contributed to the determination of context. This more interactional and emergent view of context relates to what Gumperz called contextual cues (1982, 1992). As noted above, these are verbal and non-verbal signals used by co-participants to dynamically construct context. This view of context is similar to that held by sociocultural scholars who also believe that context and culture are mutually established through evolving practices.

While examples of this more dynamic approach to context are rare in developmental science, examples do exist. For instance, Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaeger's (2018) build the case for bodies, agency, and culture to be intersubjectively constructed within the flow of ongoing verbal interactions. For instance, when examining autistic children's development, rather than adopting an approach based on cognitive deficits, the authors explore how these individuals make sense of and participate in activities with others. They, like others, argue for the importance of studying language practices and the constitutive role they play in processes of human development (Budwig, 2003b, 2019).

Bamberg (1997, 2020) similarly has illustrated the dynamic role that interactional practices play in identity formation using the small story and narrative practice approach to identity formation. Culture and context are not fixed entities impacting individuals' development; rather they are emergent properties of interactions. Highlighting the value of examining narrative practices, especially as participants are engaged in ongoing storytelling in real time, Bamberg argues that participants bring to these interactions a set of shared and embodied cultural practices of storytelling in the form of both bodily and verbal practices in their social interactions. In these contexts, narrators are not simply telling stories revealing an underlying identity; rather participants are engaging in navigation practices involved in identity work. Bamberg's narrative approach looks at identity formation in terms of interactive practice, suggesting the sort of contextualization process outlined above. Individuals are not developing "an identity"; rather, interactants have fluid repertoires available to deploy to construct a sense of who they are and how they position others in ongoing activities. This work highlights the importance of

examining a holistic relation between identity and practice as individuals negotiate what it means to belong to a community with others.

### 3 Conclusions

This chapter has provided the chance to examine one of the central principles of the relational- developmental paradigm that has been gaining significant attention in developmental science, namely, the principle of holism. Reviewing three dominant frameworks provides evidence for emerging momentum in identifying bidirectional relations between organism and culture. In order to avoid the confusion noted though, there is need for further precision in the nature and processes of *how* bidirectionality impacts developmental trajectories. We have noted that modern socio-cultural perspectives with their extensive linkages to other disciplines have borrowed methodological frameworks and tools from work going on in linguistic and cultural anthropology. This has led to a much more nuanced account that not only incorporates *that* bidirectional relations between organism and culture exist but also describes *how* organisms and culture dynamically interact in the course of development.

Psychology, like many disciplines, has become fragmented, and its connections to other disciplines have decreased significantly. While consistent with the Cartesian split-mechanistic metatheories, relational- developmental metatheory opens the door to consider the advantages of disciplines within broader systems approaches. Piaget (1972) encouraged interdisciplinary considerations arguing epistemological holism is central. I have argued that the trajectory for considering bidirectional relationship between individual and culture in some developmental approaches, while an improvement over mechanistic accounts seem outdated, replicating the historical shifts witnessed in other disciplines that transitioned from decontextual studies, to embedding studies *in* cultural context, to looking at contextualization processes as emergent within interactional frames. Developmental scholars have much to learn from disciplines that already began considering bidirectional organism-culture relations several decades ago.

The conceptual frameworks that scholars bring to their work influences both theory and practice (Budwig & Alexander, 2021). It is exciting to consider the implications of the shift toward relational metatheoretical approaches. But to make significant gains as a field, developmental science has further work to do in better untangling how holism and in particular the nature of the bidirectional relationship between individual and culture are imagined in developmental science. Relational perspectives open the door not only to clarifying theory and research but also for moving beyond long-held western ideologies in ways that could make inclusive and equitable practice possible.

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# The Trajectory of Jaan Valsiner's Thought



James V. Wertsch

Any version of cultural psychology assumes that human mental life is shaped by sociocultural context, and this claim applies as much to researchers as to those they study. As such, this makes a good starting point for understanding Jaan Valsiner as a major figure on the global scene in cultural psychology and social philosophy. Part of Jaan's sociocultural milieu has been the international network of scholars and practitioners that he himself has helped created, but a broader set of issues are involved, including the forces that shaped him starting in his early years.

## 1 Estonian Background

I am not in a position to trace Jaan's ideas back to his upbringing in Estonia, but I was fortunate to pick up his trail some four decades ago when he first made his appearance as a young scholar in the West. He and I started corresponding after he managed to get to Sweden at the beginning of 1980, and we continued our discussion about shared research interests after he arrived in the USA later that year. More than anyone else, the person responsible for connecting us was Peeter Tulviste (1945–2017), who studied in Moscow with A.R. Luria, V.P. Zinchenko, and other major figures and then moved back to his native Estonia to pursue his career at the University of Tartu. Early on in his academic career, Peeter made major contributions to research on “verbal thinking” under the tutelage of Luria. These included empirical studies of people in Siberia who had only sporadic exposure to literacy, leading Peeter to become an important contributor to research on the effects of literacy on cognition (Luria, 1976; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Tulviste, 1988).

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In addition to being an accomplished young scholar, Peeter was a “cosmopolitan patriot” (Wertsch, 2020). As such, he encountered harassment from Soviet authorities when he moved back to Estonia. There he was pressured to stop organizing informal discussion groups with students about Estonia’s past, including episodes of brutal oppression in previous decades, and this threatened his promising career as one of Estonia’s rising academic figures. By that point, however, he had compiled a solid track record of engaging with others in official circles as evidenced by his unusual move of going off to Moscow State University for his higher education, and this made it hard to place him neatly in one or another ideological category. I came to respect Peeter’s ability to balance the need to work with people with whom he disagreed while at the same time stubbornly resisting heavy-handed authoritarianism.

An illustration of the latter occurred when Peeter had finished his doctoral dissertation at Moscow State University, but obstinately resisted adding the “hallelujah paragraphs” lauding the brilliance of Marx and Lenin required for a degree to be officially granted. He finally succumbed to the pressure of university authorities, but it was an episode that was part of the story of who he was when he returned to his native Estonia. There, he developed a reputation of integrity and honor, and when the Soviet Union collapsed and the faculty members of Tartu University were looking for an untainted and trusted figure, he was elected to the prestigious position of the first post-Soviet rector of that institution. As one of a small group of talented and independent-minded scholars in psychology in Estonia, Peeter told me about Jaan Valsiner. As I outline below, Jaan also displayed something of this mixture of cosmopolitanism and principled stubbornness, leading me to conclude that the combination may reflect a sort of Estonian personality profile.

## 2 Developmental Ideas

Among the first items Jaan lists amid the literally hundreds of publications on his CV is the 1974 article co-authored with H. Mikkin on “Nonverbal communication in dyads,” which appeared in Russian in *Tartu University Studies in Psychology*. At the time this came out, I was still in graduate school at the University of Chicago and was preparing to spend a postdoctoral year in Moscow to immerse myself in the works of several figures in psychology. In the process, I came to appreciate the importance L.S. Vygotsky and others attached to the “general genetic law of cultural development,” which posits that mental processes appear first on the social, or “intermental,” plane and then on the individual or “intramental” plane. Similar ideas could be found in Western schools of thought such as George Herbert Mead’s form of symbolic interactionism (see Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000), but in the 1970s claims about the social origins of individual consciousness remained largely out of the mainstream of US information processing psychology. Hence, I thought I was onto something new and pursued several studies of how adult-child interaction could give rise to individual cognitive abilities (e.g., Wertsch, 1979).

I am sure that Jaan viewed his 1974 study with Mikkin as part of a much broader and richer intellectual tradition than I was able to appreciate at the time. For him, the study represented just one small corner of his sophisticated knowledge of Soviet and European thought that explored the social formation of mental processes. What I have in mind extends well beyond Marxist theory. To be sure, Jaan was familiar with “Scientific Marxism-Leninism”; no one who went through the Soviet education system at that time could not be. But I have long thought that even though Vygotsky recognized Marx’s genius, there was nothing *necessarily* Marxist about most of his claims concerning the social origins of human consciousness, and I suspect Jaan had a similar take. Instead, his empirical studies reflected a broad view of the relationship between sociocultural setting and human mental life based on an impressive array of European scholarship.

What began with a focus on dyadic interaction and child development for Jaan soon expanded into a remarkable range of theoretical and conceptual issues that guided his writings over the following decades, and along with many others, I have profited immensely from his efforts. For me, this began with his creative reflection on constructs such as Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, which he expanded into an account of “bounded indeterminacy” involving negotiations with the “zone of freedom of movement” and the “zone of promoted action,” a line of inquiry that he reported in his 1987 volume *Culture and the Development of Children’s Action* (second edition, 1997). By that point, Jaan was a leading figure in a vibrant international discussion of the social origins of mental functioning in children and made countless contributions such as his 1998 volume *The Guided Mind*. There he expanded on the semiotic analysis needed in his cultural-psychological approach to human personality and outlined a vision that drew on multiple conceptual and disciplinary strands of thought. The product was an elaborate account of the construction and transformation of functional sign hierarchies that shape human action.

### **3 A Truly Interdisciplinary and International Scholar**

By this time in his career, the range of theoretical traditions that Jaan drew on was so wide-ranging that it was difficult to categorize him in any single discipline in the human sciences. This is precisely the kind of scholarship that is often lauded by university deans and presidents in their calls for interdisciplinary research. But it is also the kind of scholarship that causes unease in disciplines such as psychology as they operate in the modern university in the USA. I don’t think I ever heard Jaan say so explicitly, but I am certain that over decades he has frequently encountered comments like: “That may be interesting, but it really isn’t psychology.” Such assessments may be easy to laugh off, but they reflect the power of what Max Weber called bureaucratic rationality in the real world as it plays out in professional journals and university departments. This is true in the USA, but also in many other places of the world, and it created frustration for figures such as Jaan as they have tried to pursue their academic careers.

Instead of simply complaining about this, however, Jaan seems to have viewed it as a challenge to create new spheres of inquiry and lead the way for others in interdisciplinary scholarship. For him personally, it gave rise to an outpouring of articles and volumes in cultural psychology. Much of this scholarship was devoted to laying out the theoretical premises developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that supported his conceptual and empirical research. While many of us were coming to recognize the brilliance of Vygotsky and other figures from Russia, Jaan was busy casting a much broader net to expand his readers' appreciation of ideas and figures who were largely unfamiliar in the West. For example, he and one of his frequent collaborators, René van der Veer, wrote and edited publications on the "forgotten contributions of Mikhail Basov" (Valsiner & van der Veer, 1991), a figure who had indeed been largely forgotten in Western scholarship.

The list of figures on whom Jaan has drawn in his writings goes on and on, but the larger point is that his efforts reflect a sort of magisterial, European-style scholarship that was often missing and not sufficiently appreciated in the USA. The broad sweep of his vision is reflected, for example, in his 2020 volume *Sensuality in Human Living: Cultural Psychology in Human Affect*, where he further developed his cultural psychology of semiotic mediation to argue that human sexuality can be subsumed in the more general domain of sensuality. This is a typically sophisticated and ambitious project for him and is yet another effort to break out of standard disciplinary confines of psychology.

Jaan's trajectory of research creativity and productivity is impressive in its own right, especially given the resistance it sometimes encountered in the form of disciplinary constraints, but to understand his lasting impact on the human sciences, it is crucial to consider the ambitious efforts he has undertaken over the years to provide opportunities and publication outlets for other scholars. His tireless efforts in this regard amount to a large-scale program of generosity to others as they sought to make their own contributions to interdisciplinary thought. His creation of the journal *Culture and Psychology* in 1994, which quickly became a highly regarded journal for colleagues from many disciplines and countries, is just one noteworthy contribution in this respect.

Jaan's global leadership in these efforts is truly striking. As I learned from Peeter Tulviste, coming from a small nation like Estonia that has been buffeted by large outside powers for centuries requires maintaining a focus on one's own vision while having to engage with other powerful voices. As with Peeter, Jaan took this to be an opportunity and challenge in his professional life rather than an impediment, and the result has been his emergence of a figure who helped colleagues, especially junior colleagues, create new spaces for creative intellectual inquiry that transcends standard disciplinary boundaries. He was aided by the fact that in addition to speaking Estonian, Russian, and English, he mastered German and Portuguese. This provides yet one more signal of his interest in collaborating with colleagues from around the world, and it has been manifested in countless visits and lectures at universities on every continent.

The current state of Jaan's multidisciplinary, multinational vision and its implications for contemporary issues is reflected in several of his recent publications. In

his 2019 edited volume *Social Philosophy of Science for the Social Sciences*, for example, he warns against prejudices that “pre-sets . . . understanding in ways that lead to serious absence of knowledge and failure to understand rapid changes in the world” (p.3); indeed, he suggests the reliance on the “dead thoughts” of opinions can lead to “society’s suicide” (ibid.). This amounts to a call for the social sciences to produce useful knowledge, and within the social sciences, it notes that “the notion accepted in psychology since the 1930s that the ‘scientific’ approach to phenomena necessarily involves quantification (‘assigning number’) has led the field to a conceptual impasse” (ibid.). The conceptual breadth and ambition of the volume make it an important contribution in their own right, and this is further strengthened by Jaan’s cosmopolitan proclivities as reflected in the fact that the contributors include authors from Norway, Chile, Denmark, Australia, and Sweden—a sort of short list of the much broader global array of nations from which his collaborators have come over the years.

## 4 Conclusion

In short, Jaan Valsiner has been visionary. He has not only contributed mightily to global scholarship through his own writings, but by creating transdisciplinary spaces for colleagues, especially junior colleagues, to explore new means for addressing major issues facing everyone. By providing a model of innovative thinking in his own scholarship, but also through his constant generosity in helping others pursue their own thinking, Jaan has created a major legacy. His efforts have sometimes not been appreciated in psychology in its standard disciplinary form as reflected in departmental structures in universities and in journals and other publications. Indeed, his efforts have sometimes been viewed as a form of intellectual stubbornness, but this is perhaps one of the gifts that the little nation of Estonia has given to the world.

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# Forever Feeding Forward



Tania Zittoun

People develop over time, in ways unpredictable for themselves and for others. However, they have also unique ways of doing so: they have styles of looking for newness and dealing with it, solving difficulties or being carried away when things go well, and specific motives, which, like signature, mark their ways. Jaan Valsiner, like everyone, has such a melody of living – a unique way of moving in time and space, across countries and worlds of ideas (Zittoun et al., 2013). He does not develop a linear theoretical project; he pursues too many interests, too deeply, to progress in one direction only. Even though these interests grow according to their own logic, they eventually become part of an ever-evolving whole, thanks to Jaan Valsiner’s formidable integrative capacities.<sup>1</sup>

In these few pages, I wish to address two themes that have been present in Jaan Valsiner’s work since his first monograph and that are still evolving: semiotic guidance and affects. After introducing when I met the man and his work, I will attempt to retrace the main evolutions of these two themes through his monographs and other works – contributions that have inspired and questioned my own work for the past 25 years and that still do so.

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<sup>1</sup>See, among others, his explorations in the history of psychology (Valsiner, 1988, 2005b, 2007b, 2009, 2012; Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2000), dynamics of signs (Valsiner, 1998, 2000, 2007a, 2019, 2020), modes of externalization (Valsiner, 2000, 2001a, 2020), interdisciplinary meta-theoretical issues (with mathematicians, logicians, etc.) (Cabell & Valsiner, 2014; Valsiner, 2001a; Valsiner et al., 2009), etc.

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## 1 Genesis

In the late 1990s, having been trained as a social psychologist of development (Zittoun & Perret-Clermont, 2009), pursuing an intuition according to which people learn from fiction and the arts and through informal channels, I was writing a PhD on young parents choosing names for their children (Zittoun, 2004a, 2004c). Naming used to be typically prescribed by given cultural systems, yet people now defined their own rules of naming, in a very personal way, often referring to films, songs, and novels. Naming demands a form of symbolic *bricolage*, and first names acquire complex semiotic functions. It is also a strongly affect-laden activity – future parents are excited, happy, scared, loving, and all these affects, often contained by these artworks, can guide, or leave traces, in their work of naming. In search for a theoretical frame to account for these dynamics binding cultural systems and personal sense-making, I “discovered” the work of Jaan Valsiner. Two concepts played a key role to account for the processes by which collective culture becomes mind and how people create their personal culture: internalization and externalization. These were years of intense debate around these concepts, their extensions, and limits (Lawrence & Valsiner, 1993, 2003; Toomela, 1996; Valsiner, 1997) (see also Valsiner, 2007a, b, pp. 340–342 and Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015).

In these years I was also lucky to meet Jaan Valsiner and discuss these issues with him. This was for me the founding step of my own understanding of a socio-cultural psychology of human development, something I have pursued since, in an inspirational and generative continuous dialogue with him and with many other colleagues. For example, around 2012 Jaan Valsiner invited me to join in the writing of *Human Development in the Life Course: Melodies of Living*, as part of a “gang of six” (Dankert Vedeler, Joao Salgado, Miguel Gonçalves, and the late Dieter Ferring) (Zittoun et al., 2013). As we were collecting data to ground our approach, one idea progressively came to the fore: that of the centrality of imagination in the course of life and, with it, the fact that courses of lives cannot only be described linearly, as what happens, but that also that what does count in the shaping of lives, is what does not happen – ideas then pursued in dialogue with Tatsuya Sato’s work (Zittoun & Sato, 2018; Zittoun & Valsiner, 2016) and that I further explored in my work on imagination with Alex Gillespie (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016) and other colleagues (Hawlina et al., 2020; Zittoun & de Saint-Laurent, 2015; Zittoun & Glăveanu, 2018).

Beyond themes begetting such fruitful dialogues, Jaan Valsiner explores various lines of questioning which are difficult yet central for his semiotic cultural psychology. I will focus on two, these evolving around the questions of semiotic guidance, and of affects.

## 2 Semiotic Guidance

One of the challenges of cultural psychology is to account for the facts that culture is enabling and constraining people yet, also, that they have a margin of freedom and so can imagine and create their lives. So, how to speak about this at times authoritative, at times liberating work of culture?

The question of how culture “guides” our conduct is present from the very beginning of Jaan Valsiner’s inquiry. In his writings over the years, the agents, objects, and forms of this “guidance” have changed: first, parents and teachers guide children’s conducts; then, complex sociocultural creations such as social representation or myths guide people; and finally, the ornamented nature of our built environment may do so.

Hence, in his early 1987 book on *Culture and the Development of Children’s Actions*, Valsiner proposed a theoretical frame to account for early cultural conduct, such as children learning to use a spoon to eat with the help of adults (Valsiner, 1987). Valsiner spoke of the boundaries defining the range of possible actions (he defined the conceptual system of three zones of bounded indeterminacy in human action), canalization, a concept he borrowed from Waddington, and *cultural constraining*. In *The Guided Mind*, published 11 years later (Valsiner, 1998), Valsiner explored further the process of “constraints”, as:

A regulator of the move from the present to the immediate future state of the developing organism-environment system, which delimits the full set of possible ways of that move, thus enabling the developing organism to construct the move under a reduced set of possibilities. (Valsiner, 1998, p. 52)

*Constraints* are thus dynamic, temporary regulators, which can be external, co-constructed from the outside, for instance, by which parents try to regulate their children’s actions, or these can be internally constructed (“a person’s self-constraining of acting, feeling, or thinking, in dialogue with different meanings”) (Valsiner, 1998, p. 52). The power of these constraints on development comes, among other things, from their redundancy, for instance, when there is redundancy between semiotic and action constraining (e.g. a mother tells a child not to do X because X is bad), due to overlaps between internal and external constraints (e.g. knowing it is not good to eat X and being reminded that it is not good to eat X), or because of overlapping internalized constraints (e.g. I know X is not good for my health and I know I should not eat out of meal times). Valsiner’s analysis then moves to the constraining power of meanings in sociogenesis as well at the level of the person. He calls *semiotic mediation* “a subjective preadaptation for encountering always indeterminate futures” (Valsiner, 1998, p. 281), while *semiosis* “is a process of construction and use of signs of different kinds (...) that guides the person’s development”, eventually leading to *semiotic regulation of the self* (Valsiner, 1998, p. 281), later distinguishing autoregulation vs hetero-regulation by signs (Valsiner, 2001b). In his 2000 *Culture and Human Development*, Valsiner uses the concept of “regulation” to speak for instance about “cultural regulation of women’s conduct during pregnancy” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 157) and “self-regulation” to characterize how

children progressively develop autonomy and intentionality demanding goal definition and hierarchization (Valsiner, 2000, p. 232). One chapter is called “personal participation and its sociocultural guidance”, to discuss the homogenizing function of schools and the fact that teachers are “guiding” or promoting certain conduct in children (Valsiner, 2000, p. 260).

Interestingly, in these years, Valsiner also mentions forms of semiotic constraining that can be carried out by semiotic constructs, such as proverbs, which have a function of *collective-cultural canalization* (Valsiner, 1998, p. 82), or social representations, which can be seen as a field guiding human thinking and feeling (Valsiner, 2003, para. 7.3). This idea was also pursued in a little known 2003 paper with Sumedha Gupta, titled *Myths and minds: implicit guidance for human conduct*, where the role of “macroscopic semiotic complexes” such as “myths, songs, rituals, historical narratives, sports and war games” was explored (Gupta & Valsiner, 2003, p. 179). These “collective-cultural resources” operate through the person’s semiotic autoregulation, providing “manifold input for that regulation” (Gupta & Valsiner, 2003, p. 183), mainly through their inherent dialogical tensions.

At that time, I was trying to account for the way in which songs, books, and other cultural experiences can transform a person’s experience; having read Levi-Strauss, Vygotsky, and psychoanalysis, I was ready to accept that art pieces somehow divide the flow of a person’s inner experience, and as sorts of external digestive machines, they operate through semiotic guidance and transform them; each person would react uniquely to a cultural element, depending on their personal experiences. I have thus tried to account, over the years, for the specific semiotic guidance provided by films, songs, or art works that have a unique resonance for a given person and that can, through their complex multimodal semiotic composition, guide and transform their experience – people hence turning them into symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2006, 2013; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2014).

In Valsiner’s later work, *Ornamented Lives*, the issue of guidance is examined under a very different angle. Here, Valsiner describes the shapes of ornaments on buildings (open and closed lines, flowers, threshold markers) and, eventually, landscapes and clothing. His argument is that these ornaments, rather than being mere “decorations”, are “total patterns of textures in our human environment which – exactly by their location at the periphery of our consciousness – are of central relevance for the guidance of our psychological function” (Valsiner, 2019, p. 55). Such a move gave me the means to approach the relation people may have with the lived environment, including more open landscapes that characterize non-urban region – hills or valley – in which people live and which, by their natural and cultural patterning, may actually guide and shape patterns of feeling and thinking (Zittoun, 2019).

In all this work, it seems that the notion of “guidance” was never frontally defined<sup>2</sup>; one may thus wonder if it has the status of a theoretical concept or whether it works as a heuristically powerful metaphor, while the actual concepts are these of

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<sup>2</sup>To the best of my knowledge; yet it may be that the notion has been defined in publications I have not examined here.

constraints, canalization, or regulation. It also raises further questions: How to articulate guidance by people, by social representations, by artefacts, and landscapes? How does guidance change with development? And can the guidance of actions, thinking, or affects be described equivalently?

### 3 Theorizing Affects

An important part of human experience is affective, and the way we feel is both enabled and constrained by cultural systems and semiotic mediation. Surprisingly, affects are quasi-absent within Jaan Valsiner's book on the development of children (Valsiner, 1987); they however start to appear in his *The Guided Mind*: "the flow of sentiments within the intrapersonal feelings field becomes recognized by collective-culturally provided emotion terms, which become connected with different area of the feeling field and provide it with a temporary hierarchical structure" (Valsiner, 1998, p. 92). Affects and feelings are thus named and progressively organized into semiotic hierarchies.

In 2004–2005 during a stay at Clark University to work with Jaan Valsiner, I was trying to account for the transitions experienced by young people – young people grieving, anxious about their future, feeling uncertain, excited, or in love – and the way in which symbolic resources, such as music, films, and artwork, helped them to elaborate these affect-laden experiences. Under Valsiner's guidance I started to explore Janet's work on affects (Zittoun, 2004b, 2008); yet this is not all.

In these years, Jaan Valsiner was turning his intuition on affects into a model (Valsiner, 2005a) then presented and developed in his *Foundations of Cultural Psychology* (Valsiner, 2007a, p. 312). It articulates "four levels" of affective semiosis and aims at demonstrating "how affect operates" through generalization. The four levels are related to different forms of experience; signs of different degree of generality mediate them and each other. One thus moves from undifferentiated excitation (level 0), which can then be differentiated in a global feeling experience (level 1); it can be designated by an emotional term ("sad", level 2), which can itself be mediated by a more general category of feeling ("I feel bad", level 3); eventually these can be mediated by a hyper-generalized affective semiotic field (level 4), which is vague and open, and yet constraints or enables the other levels of experience. Hence, semiotic dynamics enable progressive distancing from immediate affective experiences and eventually generate them.

Beyond the seductive aspect of the model, I felt that it suffered from a mechanic understanding of affects. Psychoanalysis, literature, and experience teach us that our emotional life is central to experience; it grows and develop in interpersonal dynamics, it can be cultivated and transformed, yet it can also remain untamed and invade us, body and mind. Affects are not only regulated by culture; they can also be triggered and chiselled by cultural means and art work. Based on such intuitions, I tried to expand Jaan Valsiner's model as part of an "architecture" of the mind (Zittoun, 2006). First, I located semiotic mediation within interpersonal

relationships. Then, I addressed a series of limitations of the model: (1) affects and emotions are not only organized vertically; there are many horizontal semiotic dynamics; (2) it is limitative to think that all level 2 and 3 are conscious, while 1 and 4 are not; experience shows that there is much more going on at the periphery of our consciousness even when we can categorize experience; and (3) there are different means to bring non-conscious affects to consciousness; not all demand languages; yet one has to account for the fact that complex cultural elements, such as books, rituals, or painting, can bring non-conscious experiences to consciousness, and doing so transform their very affective nature. This expansion, more cumulative than integrative, was further explored in collaboration with Sergio Salvatore (Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011; Zittoun, 2011); it still needs to be worked through.<sup>3</sup>

On his side, Jaan Valsiner has expanded his own understanding of emotions. In the *Invitation* (Valsiner, 2014), the four-level of affects models is presented and defended. However the role of cultural “things” becomes much more important; and objects, body parts, places, and gardens start to be discussed, for their capacity, through semiotic mediation, to generate aesthetic and sensual experiences. Valsiner also discusses architectural forms, their guidance power, and our experiences in overdetermined cultural environments. To account for how these experiences, which are affective, can become ambivalent and often escape to language, Valsiner expands his model of levels with the concepts of *schematization* and *pleromatization* (Valsiner, 2014, p. 242), introduced many years earlier (Valsiner, 2006). In schematization the complexity of experience is simplified, reduced by their link to a sign or a category; through pleromatization, experiences are related to sign complexes, or fields, which “guide feeling and thinking in complexes and pseudo-concepts” (Valsiner, 2014, p. 240). Hence, narration reduces or transforms our experiences through schematization while painting and architectural constructions tend to generate or guide them through pleromatization. Pleromatization thus accounts for “horizontal” affective associations between experiences or “upconscious” echoes of experiences, non-verbal associations, and sudden insights. Yet these two processes can create opposition and tensions and thus “a mutual feed-forward loop” (Valsiner, 2014, p. 214): “art is a medium in which the affective – aesthetic – relating to the world is being brought to the foreground. Hence it is often the case that simply attaching labels to some art genres created an opposition to the non-verbally encoded message” (Valsiner, 2014, p. 214).

In *Ornamented Lives*, which examines the complex semiotic guidance provided by our material environments (see above), the core argument is that “the panoramas of our external experiencing have a counterpart in the intrapsychological domain in the form of *affective fields*” (Valsiner, 2019, p. 161). Affective fields “entail general feeling that is not yet differentiated into explicit categorization in terms of emotions. They are signs – field-like signs – that capture our subjective domains as affective landscapes of our interior” (Valsiner, 2019, pp. 161–162). Valsiner thus moves from

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<sup>3</sup> Something I plan doing soon.

an analysis of the ornaments of the environment, to the body, through the affective aspects of the psyche.

Affects finally become central in *Sensuality in Human Living* (Valsiner, 2020), which has as subtitle “cultural psychology of human affect”. In this book, “sensuality is the general term to cover the whole array of hyper-generalized affective complexes”. Valsiner argues that sensuality is central in our experience, which “makes affective life the centre of the *psyche*” (Valsiner, 2020, p. ix). Valsiner examines mainly eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting and sculpture, as well as various types of clothing and windows. These create compositions inviting deep encounters, feeling-in, which are mainly pleromatic; yet these experiences are also fundamentally ambivalent: they trigger desire and awe, sensual needs yet divine inspiration, etc. Valsiner expands his affective hierarchical model by introducing *sublime* experiences, at level 3 of generalized feelings, which generate a tension between self-interest and disinterest; interest may make fall back in level 1 or 2 of experiences as mere desire, sensual, or erotic pleasure; a disinterested move toward level 4 brings to hyper-generalized *aesthetic* experiences. More generally, we primarily encounter the world sensually, whether through aesthetic or sexual eroticism; in either case these experiences can turn down to biological satisfaction, or to aesthetic synthesis. Valsiner thus emphasizes the possible trajectories of our affective sensual experiences, which are temporal and ambivalent, when encountering cultivated environments or artefacts – gardens, churches, clothes, and paintings – until their resolution. Valsiner thus concludes on “feelings to be the core of our rationality” (p. 85).

Valsiner’s restoration of the primacy of affective encounters opens new ways for considering people’s immediate situated experiences. Currently working on older people’s relation to their homes and living environment – the street, the village, the mountain – we<sup>4</sup> thus realize how much people feel-in places and how much their ageing body can be the locus of the greatest and purest aesthetic contemplation – of the light shivering on the leaves of a familiar tree – or of the most abjection. However some questions are still open: Why and how are different persons differently feeling-in the same landscape or art work? How precisely are these affects guided? How do affects change with development? And how do affects change thinking and action?

## Opening

Jaan Valsiner has an insatiable intellectual curiosity and a remarkable propensity to explore new fields of knowledge, beyond national borders, disciplinary boundaries, group affiliation, or social norms: Indian poetry, lingerie, the taste of octopus, and concepts may equally become material for questioning his current state of understanding, trigger revisions of his work, engage in new avenues, and invite

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<sup>4</sup>In the HomAge project on “Modes of housing for older people”, with Michèle Grossen, Fabienne Gfeller and Martina Cabra.

integrative efforts. Here I attempted to retrace some aspects of his trajectory of thinking about semiotic guidance and about affects. Along the way, I also identified issues left open. On the one side, although two of Valsiner's book use the term "guided" in their title, and it appears in the headings of many papers as well, guidance itself seems not to have been defined; also, different forms of guidance explored over the years are not yet integrated. On the other hand, affects have moved from the periphery of Valsiner's work, to its very heart: yet now, under their new theorization, how will they be articulated to the classical dynamics of internalization and externalization, or contribute to a general understanding of human development? Hence, Jaan Valsiner's work on semiotic guidance and affects is fundamental for his project of a semiotic cultural psychology; yet it also has its blind spots. And perhaps it is so that such an enquiry is forever feeding forward.

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# Cultural Processes from the Inside: What Happens During and After a Movement?



Boulanger Dany

## 1 Introduction

In this paper, I take part in Valsiner's theoretical adventure by overcoming the static assumptions on human experience and in order to shed light on undetermined processes (movement) in irreversible time (Valsiner, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2014a, 2014b). This entails recognizing the flexible nature of forms as they unfold (Valsiner, 2010). Forms are in constant movement and movement unfolds in-between: between infinities—inside and outside—between reality and virtuality (the not-yet and the imagined), between flexibility and stability, and between the past and the future *in the present* (Valsiner, 2003). There lies novelty.

As simple as these claims may appear, they resist our commonsensical way to conceive of our world:

Novelty has been a major conceptual puzzle for developmental science. As something that has not yet been encountered it defies our habits of classification of phenomena into the established categories [...] So it needs to gain conceptualization. (Valsiner, 2010, p. 2)

The trajectory equifinality model (TEM) (Valsiner and Sato, 2006) contributes to forming a language that captures the emergence of forms in motion (Valsiner, 2005, 2010).

In this paper, I try to contribute to such a language by developing Bastos' (2017) concept of shadow trajectory that is anchored in the TEM model. I try to understand how a shadow trajectory emerges in irreversible time by delving into its qualitative and virtual aspect alongside its quantitative and "real" nature. I propose some avenues for a model of shadow trajectory in irreversible time. In an idiographic perspective (Valsiner, 2014b), I am interested in the unique experience of people. In this same logic, this reframing of the concept of shadow trajectory is a single and

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specific case that reflects a more general (“universal”) attempt at developing a cultural psychology of human movements. I do this by trying to respect and reflect the directions of cultural psychology (Valsiner, 2010):

- “advancing in qualitative methodologies to provide an understanding to complex and process-based phenomena;
- oriented toward single-case analysis;
- that focus[es] on the developmental processes and analyses of trajectories of psychological progression that include both real and imaginary components” (Valsiner, 2010, p. 1).

I particularly emphasize the third component by trying to creatively (Valsiner, 2012) re-imagine the concept of shadow trajectory with regard to its process (movement) dimension. First, I present Bastos’ (2017) concept of shadow trajectory by pointing out the fact that it refers to spatialization or, in terms of process, reterritorialization. Second, I contrast it with what happens in irreversible time—the flow of qualitative state with no spatial referent (deterritorialization). Third, I present some theoretical avenues in reference to aesthetics, particularly dance and photodynamism as well as tale narration, in order to provide a hint at what happens in irreversible time. Fourth, I move to the process of reterritorialization in relation to Bastos’ (2017) analysis.

## 2 The Concept of Shadow Trajectory

### *General Presentation*

Fig. 1 schematizes the concept of shadow trajectory in relation to dominant trajectories.

For Bastos (2017), a non-actualized or partially actualized (interrupted) trajectory (being an active politician and worker) ( $e$  in Fig. 1) pushes our dominant trajectory. This pushing dynamic is very coherent with Bergson’s (1888) concept of duration Bastos refers to. The process of becoming a mother (the move from  $xy$  to  $yy'$  in Fig. 1) is oriented by the woman’s possibilities, the shadow trajectory  $e$  (active politician and worker) providing her with some resources—becoming an independent mother taking her own decision like she would have done in work or did before interrupting it. In this process,  $e$  creates a new synthesis. In Fig. 1,  $yx$  refers to the state of not being a mother yet and  $yy'$  to achieving motherhood. The move from  $xy$  to  $yy'$  signals the transition to motherhood, which is the dominant (actualized) trajectory.  $E$ , as a latent resource, mediates this move from  $xy$  to  $yy'$ . It gives  $yy'$  a certain orientation, that of the mother being an independent mother. So, a new whole is created. I think that it captures the analysis Bastos is making.

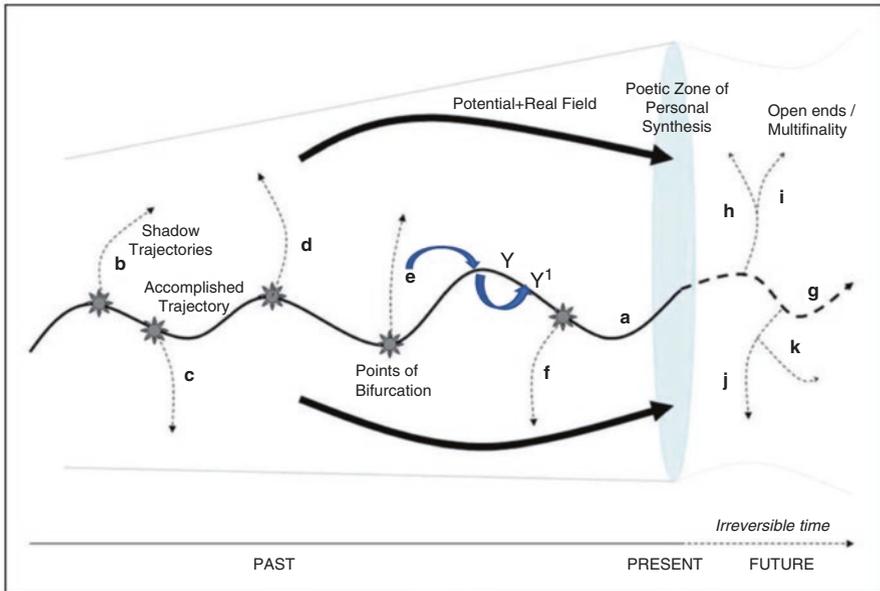


Fig. 1 Shadow trajectory. (Adapted from Bastos, 2017, p. 418, with permission)

***Shadow Trajectory as Spatialization: Retrospective Construction***

As dynamic as the perspective of Bastos is, I claim that she delves into what happens afterward when the person retrospectively intellectualized his or her trajectory and therefore spatializes it. This is what exactly enables Bastos to schematize this dynamic in references to possibilities as being (spatially) contained in people trajectories, lying *somewhere* in people’s life and to presents *parallel* trajectories (Fig. 1). Bastos points out an important dynamic pertaining to the constructive nature of memory, but in Bergson’s (1939) sense, it refers to spatializing life afterward through a narrative process in the course of an interview. The schema Bastos ends up with also expresses her own analysis in terms of spatialization.

Spatialization—creating lines and points—pertains to the socialized part of the Self (Bergson, 1888).

Cutting our flow of experience implies creating an ecosystem out of it (Asendorph & Valsiner, 1992). The latter is made of social limits, points, as coordinates between lines, and domains (work, family, motherhood).

Domains are multidimensional coordinates—as schematized in Fig. 2, domains (D1 for domain 1 and D2 for domain 2) are situated amidst different points (coordinates). So, being a mother could be situated amidst institutional (worker, mother) and political domains (politician). The second domain (D2 in Fig. 2) is generally established beforehand or afterward—so outside the flow of experience—as a goal that fits into a segmented territory.

Fig. 2 Reversible time: lines and domains

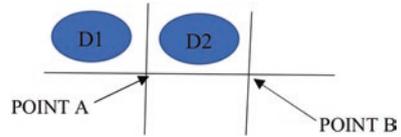
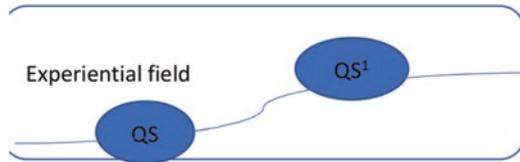


Fig. 3 Qualitative states in the flow



In this perspective, trajectories are segmented and differentiated as they fit into ecological theoretical models (c.f., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and social expectations—guiding the person toward specific goals—that contribute to segmenting personal experiences. Referring to our trajectories as differentiated segments is basically an intellectual operation (Bergson, 1888, 1907; Deleuze, 1968, 1979; Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/2000). *Constructing a shadow trajectory as a contrast with a dominant trajectory is an INTELLECTUAL, SPATIAL, and SOCIAL process.* People retrospectively construct such lines out of what happened in the course of movement, by spatializing what pertains to the flow. Bastos’ (2017) analysis is very dynamic, but it displays one side of the coin—the process of spatialization that happens afterward. The other side indicates what happens before such a retrospective construction, that is, how experience is flowing and getting organized in motion, in irreversible time.

### 3 Irreversible Time: The Organization of Qualitative States in the Flow of Motion

For Bergson (1888, 1907), irreversible time pertains to a succession of qualitative, subjective, and affective states rather than the simultaneous presence of (parallel) spatialized and objectified states.

Figure 3 schematizes such a dynamic (QS symbolizes qualitative state). A qualitative state could evolve by becoming either another version (a variant) of itself (QS<sup>1</sup> in Fig. 1) or another state (QS2). The move from QS to QS<sup>1</sup> or QS2 implies that the field of experience organizes itself and expands so that QS<sup>1</sup> or QS2 forms a more complex qualitative unit than QS (Bergson, 1907). Using Bergson’s example of a bell, each new ring already has built into it previous rings.

I propose that, in the narrative that Bastos analyses, the qualitative states are for a large extent transversal to the different social domains (being a mother or a worker) she is largely focusing upon. The fact that qualitative states are

transversal to these domains explain precisely why they are constructed and why one domain (shadow trajectory) constitutes a virtual resource—pertaining to the subjective and qualitative world of the person—for another one (dominant trajectory). What is this resource made of? It is made of qualitative states that are transversal to the domains.

For example, Bastos (2017) illustrates one of the woman’s “initial transition between family and medical control over delivery” (p. 8, the emphasis is mine) as follows:

She used to *positively valued* being prepared for marriage and motherhood and this sign had a promoter function in her *coping* with childbearing. Through her experience, she has also shown *strength and initiative* –for instance, she decided to have her second baby at home, against her husband-doctor’s opinion. (Bastos, 2017, p. 8, the emphasis is mine)

Beneath the domains (family and medical control over delivery) lies a more tacit and experiential articulation (organization) between qualitative and affective states—being prepared (qualitative state 1) and opposing herself to her husband (qualitative state 2)—that constitutes hidden “stuff” guiding the move from one domain to another. In Bastos’ analysis, this “stuff” is present in the shadow trajectory, and it reorients people life (see the circular arrows that I added in Fig. 1). I propose to go further than Bastos by highlighting that, in the flow, qualitative states are not distinguished as shadow versus dominant trajectories. Qualitative states are moreover affective and intuitive rather than intellectual.

Yet, in this example, social domains are still there—therefore I can’t neglect them by creating an exclusive separation (Valsiner, 1998) between the person (qualitative states) and his or her social environment (social domains). I have to consider the dialectical relationship between the person’s (infinite) insiderness (from the spatial domains to the qualitative states) and outsiderness (from the qualitative state to the spatial domains) (Valsiner, 2014b).

The first step for such an integration is to delve into a transition that Bergson considers as an interval. This will furnish me with the “material” to go further in my theoretical elaboration. This integration will progressively enable me to theorize on the organization of qualitative states in irreversible time and on the retrospective construction of a shadow trajectory out of this organization.

#### **4 Transition as an Undetermined Interval Between Social Domains**

The interval between a domain A and a domain B—B takes the form of a goal—“lays *open* to activity an unlimited field into which it is driven further and further, and made more and more free” (Bergson, 1998/1911, p. 148). So, the person may be sure that he or she is reaching a well-established goal (domain B), but as he or she moves, their relation to this goal is changing without them necessarily noticing

it. It happens thanks to a margin of freedom when progressing toward this goal—it is like a point in a horizon that is constantly changing. This margin of freedom corresponds to the undetermined nature of the interval in which qualitative states unfold and organizing themselves to change the social domain B (the synthesis the I indicated with the circular arrows that I added in Fig. 1). Valsiner (2014b) presents this very idea in reference to the infinite nature of human experience situated in-between different zones.

Fig. 4 schematizes this process in which the person experiences qualitative states in the interval between domains A and B. This interval is a field of experience that organizes itself to guide the retrospective process I referred to previously in reference to Bastos’ analysis. During this interval, the person is on the move and is in a state of suspension with no clear spatial referents (deterritorialization; more on this later). What unfolds in-between may be invisible to us, but *it is the “stuff” out of which a shadow trajectory is constructed afterward* (reterritorialization; more on this later).

In Fig. 4, the oblique line corresponds to a shadow trajectory that is constructed afterward at the crossroad between the personal experience—as it is getting organized—and a social domain. The exact position of the lines in Fig. 4 is not important—I insist rather on the general schematic presentation of a shadow trajectory line at the crossing of personal (insiderness) and social (outsiderness) experiences.

To develop Bastos’ dynamic conception of trajectory, I precisely propose to delve into how a shadow trajectory is constructed in the first place—instead of analyzing it as already constructed as Bastos does—in the tension between, first, the visible (social domains) and, second, the invisible and the virtual (what happens in the flow). This angle fits well with Valsiner’s insistence on analyzing human form on the move amidst reality and virtuality (the non-real, the imagination).

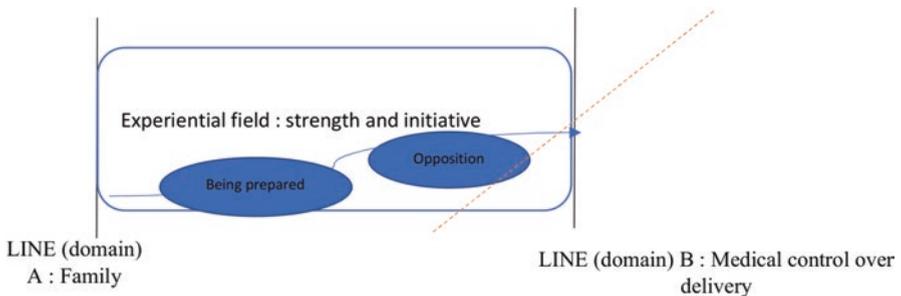


Fig. 4 Example of an interval as transition

## 5 Widening the Horizon on the Concept of Shadow Trajectory

I propose to summarize my main points on Bastos' concept and then present the general aspects I want to develop. Bastos' analysis proceeds like this:

- Starting from narration (interview) in which the past is retrospectively reconstructed.
- Out of this narration, identifying past events and analyzing, in very dynamic terms (in relation to Bergson's (1888) concept of duration), how they were interrelated (how shadow trajectories seem to have provided orientations to dominant trajectories).
- More precisely, narrowing down *this past horizon* by focusing on how, in this past, a past trajectory did influence a dominant one. For example, Bastos emphasizes the moment (in the past, as narrated in the interview) in which a woman became a mother and the influence of her past (the fact that this woman had interrupted her career) on motherhood.

Elsewhere (Boulanger, 2020a), I tried to develop Bastos' (2017) analysis by shedding light on how the memory of shadow trajectories guides the dominant trajectories as the latter unfold in irreversible time. Yet, overall, I kept the same angle as Bastos—how a shadow trajectory that is *already* constituted as such guides an emerging dominant trajectory.

Here, I explore ways to *analyze* shadow trajectories by keeping with Bastos' dynamic *conception* of it. To do this, I change the angle: I analyze *how a shadow trajectory emerges in the first place* in its interrelation with a dominant trajectory. More precisely, I make the following points:

- When we are *on the move*—experiencing motherhood as it unfolds in irreversible time—we don't have a shadow trajectory "in mind" because we do not relate to the world in a distanced and intellectual stance.
- A shadow trajectory is constructed afterward when we distance ourselves from what happened in irreversible time; we do this through reflection entailing spatialization.
- Through this reflexive process, we schematize our experience by contrasting and superposing SPATIAL LINES (shadow versus dominant trajectories) on our experiential flow in reference to SOCIAL DOMAINS (motherhood versus worker).
- We construct a shadow trajectory afterward out of the virtual and immaterial "stuff"—qualitative states—that are formed during the flow of the movement.
- In the flow of movement, our relation to the world is deterritorialized so that we don't have lines, points (bifurcation points in Bastos' model), and social domains "in mind." We rather experience qualitative states that organize themselves to form the (immaterial and virtual) "stuff" out of which a shadow trajectory is constructed, afterward, through a reflexive process.

In relation to these points, I propose to analyze, first, what unfolds in the flow of a movement—during an interval of time—in reference to a process of *detritorialization* and the formation of virtual qualitative states and, second, how a shadow trajectory is constructed afterward through a process of *reterritorialization* implying reflection and narration. My analysis of the flow implies referring to aesthetic phenomena in order to grasp processes pertaining to virtuality. I refer to dance and provide illustrations on a tale. My analysis of *reterritorialization* will take on one illustration from Bastos' own analysis. I conclude with some avenues to deepen these theoretical ideas.

## 6 Deterritorialization and Virtuality

In the course of a movement, a process of *detritorialization* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/2000) happens. Human experiences are not located in a segmented environment but in a smooth (in French, *lisse*) (Deleuze, 1972/2000)—without segmented like desert and ocean—and suspended (felt as such) zone (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972/2000). *Deterritorialization* is what happens in the interval, in irreversible time.

To push further the aesthetic dimension of shadow trajectory and delve into virtuality (Bastos' reference to poetic motion), I propose referring to photography and dance as well as tale. This will help make visible what happens virtually during an interval (what happens qualitatively in the flow between domains A and B as presented in Fig. 4). In Bergson's (1888, 1907) perspective, narrations are very limited in providing cues to what happens qualitatively in irreversible time, hence my need for aesthetic phenomena (photography and dance) that capture indeterminacy, virtuality, and emergence.

Bragaglia's (1911/2008) photodynamism—that takes part in the futurist Italian movement—enables representing interval as multiplicity. The readers could look for Bragaglia's photodynamism on Google Image, and they will find the image of a horse with many legs when jumping. The evolutive of an image—pertaining both to sense and affectivity—of the body in movement could be likened to the evolution of qualitative states (Fig. 6). Fig. 5 situates Fig. 3 in the aesthetic realm.

Bragaglia's (1911/2008) method can “trace in a face not only the expression of passing states of mind (for example), as photography and cinematography have been able to, but also the immediate shifting of volumes discernible in the immediate transformation of expression” (p. 371). He calls this the inter-movement stages of motion and is interested in an aesthetic synthesis that lyrically distorted, dematerialized, and augmented what would have otherwise been presented as a static state. He is thus interested in the virtual move from one qualitative state to another and how they are organized through a synthesis—this is precisely what is schematized in Fig. 5. The synthesis is not reductive but multiplicative—as the image is multiplied (Fig. 5) and enhancing. In this virtual realm, reality is getting augmented and accentuated—in Fig. 5, the movement is larger; the head goes higher, for example.

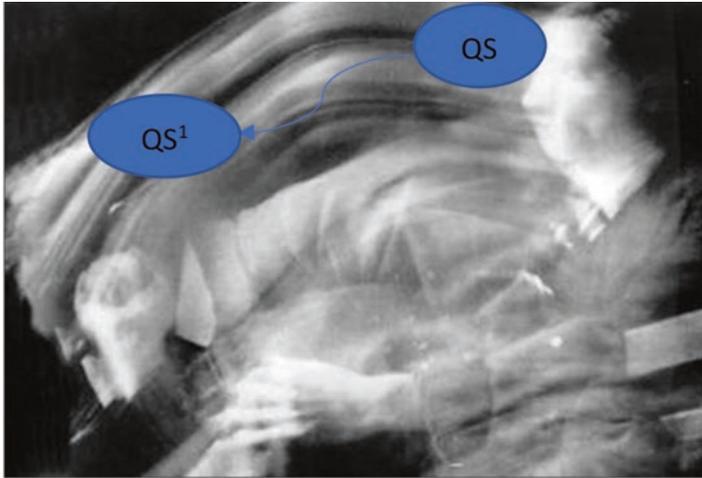


Fig. 5 Bragaglia's photodynamic

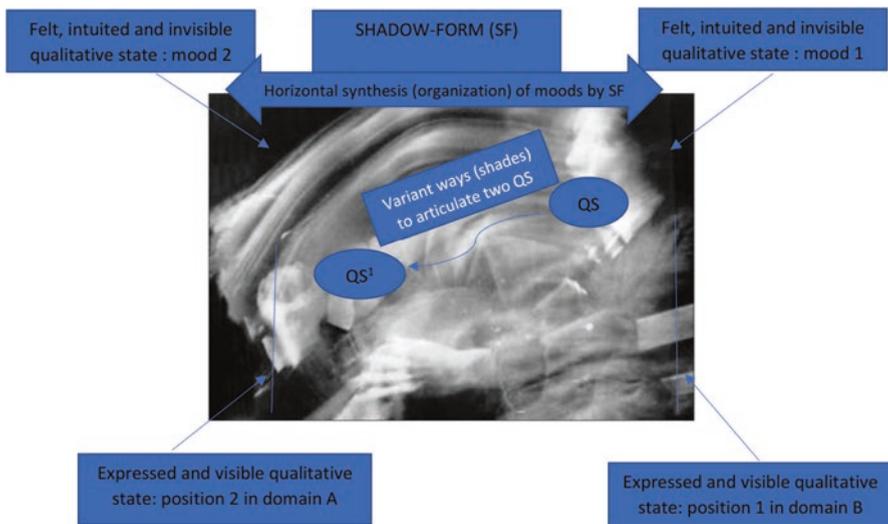


Fig. 6 Organization of qualitative states (moods) as the qualitative tones of (spatial) positions

Laban's (1976/1966) choreutic theory of movement in dance provides many cues that fit into this approach to movement. He recognizes the fact that movements augment reality by accentuating it. In his perspective, what we see (visible) in the picture of a human movement are multiple positions, but what we don't see—what is INVISIBLE yet present—is that they represent a succession of moods, that affective and invisible aspect of positions in dance, that are organizing themselves as a SHADOW FORM (Laban, 1976/1966). Moods are the affective expression of

visible positions—we can think of the sensation of pressing, winging, or floating. They are the dynamic and virtual tonalities of visual positions—what gives them a certain color and expression.

We cannot visualize in spatial terms the move from one qualitative state or sensation to another like we do with visible positions in space. The movements between those movements (inter-movement for Bragaglia, 1911/2008) as they are affectively and felt and intuited in a virtual world and take many variants. There are many *POSSIBLE ways to link these qualitative states* and organize them. These ways are intuited and felt, but are hard to clearly identify (in a spatial sense). They pertain to accentuation of how positions spatially relate to one another. The link and organization between moods is called a shadow form—the possible articulation between moods or the ways that we can switch, as felt, from one mood to another. This entails the possibilities of organizing our experiential life as it unfolds. For example, moving from the sensation of pressing to that of winding mainly happens virtually, as an intuited and felt process. There is no corresponding positions or footsteps in space.

This illustrates, through aesthetic phenomena, the organization of qualitative state during an interval (Fig. 6 integrating Figs. 3 and 5). To go further with dance, I would have to present a rather complex schema based on the whole theory of Laban, but this would not add anything to my argument. I rather propose to provide another illustration based on an aesthetic phenomenon, that of a tale that I presented in more details elsewhere (Boulanger, 2020b).

The following is an excerpt on the life of Fred Pellerin, the author of the story:

On April 2011, we learned that Pellerin had a fourth children named Marie-Poulet, a imagined girl. She is in fact the protagonist of the tales that he narrates each night to his children. As opposed to what we could have expected, the storyteller gains a lot from this *privileged relationship* with his daughters. Indeed, he both stay *in touch with the magic of imagination* thanks to them—«the snow is pink, *fairies exist, I know, they call me daddy*»--and discover as well as get *astonished by the everyday life* that is at first sight banal: « We discover our own shadow, we walk backward, we create songs... My daughters enable me to rediscover being astonished by a strand of lawn and the *vertigo of having the foot on the ground*. (Morneau, 2012, p. 38, my translation and emphasis)

The qualitative movement in the interval is symbolized by Fred Pellerin developing his affective relation—moving from the affective and qualitative state A to B—with his daughters. The qualitative states could also correspond to being in touch with magic and astonished by concrete reality. The two quotes from Fred Pellerin (in the excerpt above) indicate poetic sequences (motions) from one state to another. Behind each of the quotes from Fred Pellerin, we can feel a realm of endless (infinity) possible ways to link and organize the qualitative states, of different *shades of fantasy*. Fred Pellerin’s process of story construction implies accentuation like dance: “The storyteller has understood that his grandmother [from whom he takes his inspiration] has put society into dream, accentuated its limits and made more beautiful its forces” (Morneau, 2012, p. 57).

## 7 Expansion and Synthetic Condensation

When we feel ourselves ON THE MOVE, we are moved by the current (Bragaglia, 2018/1911). It happens when we live movement like people play music—the stream (of dance or melody) *moves us* as we experience an *elan vital* (vital momentum) that is a kind of intrinsic current (Bergson, 1932). This qualitative state (feeling on the move) can be exemplified by Fred Pellerin speaking about his intention to sustain solidarity through his tales:

We are searching / THE thing that could interest all of us / To give us again acting / And we take again the oar / We don't find the exact thing, no, / But we know that we are searching / And we push further toward the front of us / To believe that we will soon decide to stand put. (Morneau, 2012, p. 107, my translation)

This poetic passage expresses the idea of being on the move and the expanding aspect of it as we gain in momentum (*elan vital*). This is the expansive aspect of moving from one state to another. This is in this process that a qualitative state A expands—from A to A<sup>1</sup> and A<sup>2</sup>.

The following quote from Pellerin is an illustration:

We will wake up the wind, / The one that brings hope and destination. / On the words then the air, / In the big shaking handle / With four centuries of feeling on the move... / *Tell me that we charge at it!* At the limit, if we have to fall, / We would fall together. (Morneau, 2012, p. 105, my emphasis)

The wind is progressively taking a momentum (*elan vital*) as it is getting power (hope, handle), destination, and time (century). The wind (A) is becoming a forceful (A<sub>1</sub>) one. The expression “Tell me that we charge at it” is poetically situated amidst the first and the second poetic wave; it is the intermediary step leading toward the second part of this poem. This is a culminating “point” (the circle in Fig. 7) that is preparing the second wave.

Fig. 7 synthesizes such waves in which the person gets a momentum. We can feel this momentum in Bragaglia’s picture (Fig. 5) as the image is accentuating. The culminating point in Pellerin’s Tale is schematized by a circle in Fig. 7. In fact, this is *not a point* but a condense and synthetic zone—synthesizing multiplicity (the multiple images as accentuation in Fig. 5). It could be likened to condensation in dance:

Condensation in space gives us the impression of a single peak, or *selected part*, within the infinite flux of time, which is in fact disappearing space. It gives us the capacity to produce new positions, encounters and percussions, new contacts and *possibilities* of tactile experiences both within the body itself and in relation to its surroundings. (Laban, 1976/1966, p. 29-30)

**Fig. 7** Expansion and synthetic condensation



This zone condenses the first sentence—in its wholeness—and prepares the next one. This process of condensation happens between the end of a wave (elan) and the beginning of a new one. Bergson (1888) specifically gives the example of a dancer anticipating the next step in the course of a movement. In the quote from Pellerin, “tell me the we charge at it” is condensing the idea of momentum from the first sentence and leads the idea of action that is to be developed in the second sentence. There is *no (spatial) bifurcation here*, but a sense of *continuity* between qualitative states A and B with a lot of variants ( $A^1, A^2$ ) as resources.

### 8 Reterritorialization: Two Ways to Construct a Shadow Trajectory

Shadow trajectories are constructed afterward through reflection out of a shadow form which is a potential for constructing a shadow trajectory, the virtual stuff out of which it is constructed. Laban (1976/1966) specifies that “[w]e can perform these dynamic trace-forms by *enlarging* and transferring them into the kinesphere [the sphere of the body in action] where they appear as visible swings and oscillations of the body and limbs. In doing this we transform the shadow-forms of action-moods into real trace-forms [visible configuration of movement] whose *emotional content* can then be seen to *change*” (p. 60, the emphasis is mine). It is thus an EXPANDING dynamic.

The Fig. 8 displays the second part of the process—that of reterritorialization (spatializing the flow). The shadow form—which is the synthetical organization of qualitative states—is the basis for the intellectual reconstruction of trajectories as

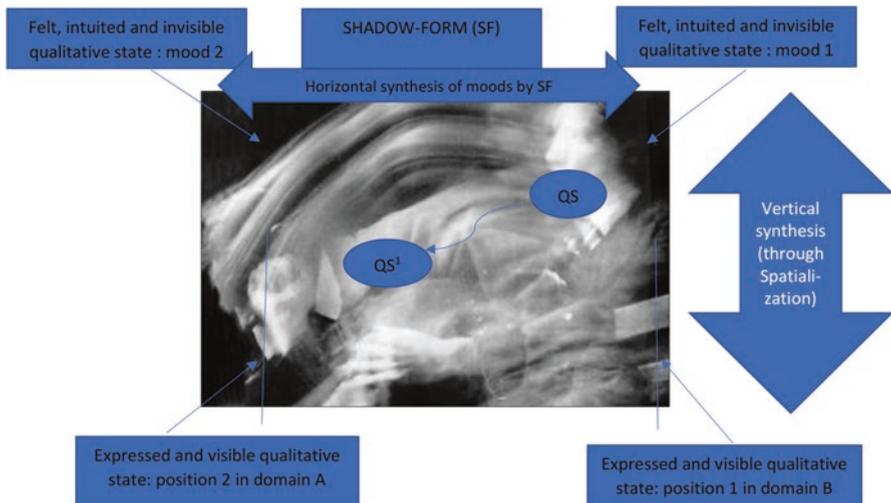


Fig. 8 Horizontal and vertical synthesis between qualitative states (moods) and positions

spatial and parallel paths. To me, Laban (2008/1911) is unclear as far as how the vertical synthesis between qualitative states and spatial positions—that could be likened to the position someone is taking vis-à-vis a certain domain—occurs and the role of shadow form. These aspects seem to constitute theoretical potentials to be elaborated. In this section, I make a general proposition around the process of reterritorialization and illustrate it in reference to one of Bastos analysis.

Deterritorialization implies creating a surplus of meaning (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972/2000). Indeed, a lot of potential meanings ( $A^1$ ,  $A^2$ ,  $B^1$ , etc.) have been produced. More have been produced than what is needed to take a certain position in space (dance) or vis-à-vis a domain (people's social positioning). In Bragaglia's (2008/1911) and Laban's (1976/1966) approaches, what happens in the virtual realm is a distortion and an AUGMENTATION of reality. Reterritorialization entails the investment of this surplus (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972/2000) into territories.

I propose two ways—out of the many possibilities—to construct a shadow trajectory out of the shadow form through reterritorialization:

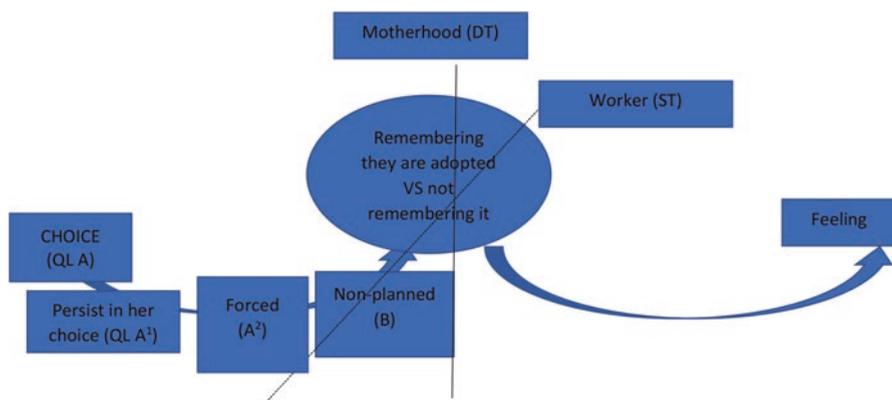
- 1) Synthetic disjunction from shadow form to territory leading to an enhancing shadow trajectory
- 2) Line inversion at an intersection through the projection of territoriality into a shadow form: inhibiting (regret) shadow trajectory.

When the person thinks, afterward, about his or her experience, they can take as a point of reference either their qualitative experience as intuited or the social domains and expectations. In the first case, the person is more like a free thinker that let his or her thought emerge in relation to their feeling as they affectively re-experience the intuited qualitative phenomenon (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972/2000). Then, he or she situates their experience in a social territory to reconstruct this very territory. In doing so, they can construct potentialities—what I *could* do or could have done in terms of possibilities. In the second case, the person disconnects himself or herself from their personal experience and starts from social domains by focalizing on what they *should have done*, in terms of regret. They do as if social expectations stand for their experience—they project the former into the later. I provide some detail on these two options, by insisting on the first one.

The first process implies having what happened in the smooth environment as the main referent (Fig. 3) and contrasting it with a segment (Fig. 4) in the social territory. It is an enhancing process in the sense that it develops the experience. It amplifies it.

A disjunctive synthesis is created out of disjunctions (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972/2000).

Figure 9 is an adaptation of Figs. 4 and 7. It schematizes the disjunctive synthesis and illustrates it in reference to one of the cases analyzed by Bastos (2017). One of the women Bastos (2017) refers to highlights her choice, which is the first qualitative state. She mentions that she “persisted in her choice for normal delivery, even going against the doctor” (Bastos, 2017, p. 417). This is one variant ( $A^1$ ) of the theme of choice. Another one is the fact that she has been forced to quit a job ( $A^2$ ). This woman also manifested the qualitative state of not having planned motherhood



**Fig. 9** Disjunctive synthesis: example from Bastos (2017)

(B)—planning is the theme of the second qualitative state. Later in the interview—as presented by Bastos—she refers to her feeling about her children.

I can therefore see two thematic movements (waves) and a transition from the state of choice to the state of feeling (about her children) like with dance (from pressing to floating). This transition is condensed in this quotation: “I don’t remember they are adopted” (p. 417). This indicates a synthesis of the qualitative states: not remembering having adopted her children synthesizes the fact of making a choice ( $A^1$  and  $A^2$ ): she does not remember it because it is quite natural for her as she was forced to do it by circumstances (the child was let alone in the hospital where she worked) ( $A^2$ ) and as she persisted in her choice ( $A^1$ ).

This quote also suggests that she had in fact made a choice (A) out of something not planned (B). The condensed zone thus also synthesizes A and B. This happens thanks to the feeling she is developing toward the child (C). She precisely said: “I don’t remember they are adopted only when I’m introducing them to someone. What I feel is not different from what I feel toward my biological children” (Bastos, 2017, p. 17). The fact of remembering it (only) when introduced to someone reinforces the fact that she does not have to remember because it is natural for her, thanks to her orientations to choice (A) and planning (B) as well as because she develops an affective relation with her child (C). This is a theme that she is developing after mentioning not remembering them being adopted. This sentence therefore indicates the theme to be developed in the second wave. The condensed zone—which is associated with the theme of memory—therefore points in the direction of C. For a more detailed analysis of the role of memory in shadow trajectory, the reader can refer to Boulanger (2020a).

What interests me the most here lies in the fact that the woman is referring to social domains—motherhood as contrasted with worker—to develop her narration and therefore make sense of her personal movements. All that unfolds in her personal experience is superimposed on domains, but it is the asset—the former is

the material for the latter. Through reterritorialization, the mother creates a shadow trajectory in relation to a dominant trajectory—therefore a unit is created.

Motherhood stands for the dominant trajectory that implied certain choices (A) along the road. The fact of being forced to quit a job (A<sup>2</sup>) and not planning to adopt (B)—but to do it in the course of her interrupted profession (as a nurse, she saw a baby to adopt)—indicates the absence of choice (being forced; A<sup>2</sup>) that fits with the shadow trajectory “being a professional” (as the woman was forced to quit this job). A<sup>2</sup> and B seem to have been projected into motherhood (the dominant trajectory line as a domain) as the woman speaks about motherhood in these terms (A<sup>2</sup> and B), both as resources (A<sup>2</sup> and B enable motherhood) and contrasts—A<sup>2</sup> and B as what has not been invested precisely in working because of the interruption of her job. So, she creates a shadow trajectory as a contrast with a dominant trajectory out of her qualitative states—A and B as they are getting organized, particularly through condensation. The later indicates a horizontal synthesis of moods leading to a vertical synthesis when projected into positions standing for social domains (Fig. 8). The second domain (worker) now takes the form of a shadow trajectory that expands the sense of her experience.

The second dynamic—line inversion—will remain more theoretical because I don’t find an illustration of it from Bastos. I take as a starting point Deleuze’s (1979) (1972/2000) reference to the inversion of lines when they meet a point of convergence. It implies starting from a territory to make sense of human process in a defensive way. As presented in Fig. 4, a point is situated amidst a vertical and a horizontal line. This is symbolized by the triangle in Fig. 9. Imagine a woman contrasting her not having a job—shadow trajectory associated with a social domain—with her not having planned to adopt children. Taking a domain and the related social expectations as the reference for her reflexive process, she would develop regret. Not being a worker would therefore be mentalized as an inversion of motherhood, as a contrast to it, as what it is not, as what she could and SHOULD have been. She would therefore develop regret that is an inhibiting and reductive experience. This spatialized process is projected into her experiential field as if what she is experiencing is what she should have done—she experiences the obligation by evacuating the potential emanating from her personal experience as it occurs in the flow.

## 9 Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to contribute to the field of cultural psychology by situating myself in Valsiner’s perspective and the ongoing efforts of researchers in this field. Particularly, I tried to develop some avenues for a model of human movements that “focus[es] on the developmental processes and analyses of trajectories of psychological progression that include both real and imaginary components” (Valsiner, 2010, p. 1).

For Valsiner, the TEM constitutes a methodological tool that captures a “range of variation [that is] qualitatively different from one another” (Valsiner, 2010, p. 14) and that implies “the inclusion of the hypothetical (not-real—or not yet real—or not to be real)” (Idem). It captures “the process of construction of a trajectory of movement of a system as it is happening” (Valsiner, 2010, p. 22). For this reason, this model—which considers what could or should happen—is a pre-factum-focused method. It is oriented toward the future instead of being based on a retrospective reconstruction of the past. For Valsiner, this kind of method is based on creativity. It also entails indeterminacy (Boulanger and Valsiner, 2017).

I extended Bastos’ concept of shadow trajectory by situating it in this pre-factum perspective. I propose some ways to look at emerging flexible forms that are fuzzy (Valsiner and Connolly, 2003; Valsiner, 2005, 2014a, b, 2016)—having a temporary character. Heterogeneity and polarization—I referred to as the construction of a contrast—appeared to be important components of a form in movement (Valsiner, 2005).

I deviate from TEM in that I propose that bifurcation happens only afterward. It is a spatial aspect that does not express the unfolding of the experience in irreversible time (Bergson, 1907). Yet, I did not evacuate spatiality. I tried to capture the whole and its relational dimension—the tension between its components. Here, reterritorialization is a necessary complement to deterritorialization. One of the limits of my elaboration is the rather vague presentation of synthesis. Laban’s model I referred to seems to suffer from the same limit. Yet, I do have to propose something innovative in a next paper. Using Valsiner’s hierarchical and semiotic approach would be certainly helpful. Deepening the avenues in reference to nothingness and emptiness (Boulanger, 2021) would help deepen the understanding of virtuality. Here, mobility of the sign and the concept of zero signifier as well as floating signifier could be helpful. Above all, I will mainly stay with aesthetic to delve into movement as Jaan personally suggested to me. In this perspective, I am trying to push further the concept of zone of proximal development. I am developing the concept of dialogical co-zone of proximal development (Boulanger et al., 2020) that I am situating in the aesthetic realm using Vygotsky’s earlier work on aesthetics and crossing it with Goethe’s early romantic perspective.

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# The Bounded Indeterminacy of Tradition



Lívia Mathias Simão

I met Jaan Valsiner in 1991, when I had the opportunity to participate, as a guest, in a series of three seminars he gave, organized by the Group of Research Thought and Language of the Faculty of Education of the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP), Brazil. Valsiner approached, in each seminar, the following subjects: Soviet Psychology, Epistemology of Psychology and Children's Cultural Development. In 1992, I was also invited to join the activities provided by that same research group, at the Education Faculty, now as a mini-course given by Valsiner, with the title of Co-constructivist Research Methodology. During the seminars and the mini-course, I realized that the person giving it was someone with not only original ideas, but who at the same time presented a great challenge to contemporary psychology based on consistent theoretical-methodological constructions.

What I didn't know, however, is that there was also a person that would be a partner in debates and academic endeavours of great intellectual opening and a friend of many "cafezinhos" and dinners, in many places, starting from Chapel Hill, where I began my post-doctorate under his supervision in 1997. Since that time, Jaan Valsiner has been a constant and generous contributor of the Laboratory of Verbal Interaction and Knowledge Construction at the Institute of Psychology of the University of São Paulo, Brazil.

For this occasion of tribute to him, I chose to elaborate some reflections on the concept of *bounded indeterminacy*, because I consider it to one of the main concepts that expose the genetic-cultural heritage, as well as the significance of Valsiner's work to the contemporary cultural psychology. *The concept of bounded indeterminacy* clearly dispels Jaan Valsiner's semiotic-cultural psychology from the dichotomy of a self-sufficient self, on the one hand, and from a sovereign environment

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external to the self, on the other hand. Equally, the concept marks Valsiner's psychology as one that denies linear causality, offering as a counterpoint a path that points to the human life's bidirectional personal-cultural channelling, which anchors itself in its own human meaning-making.

One of Valsiner's perspective resonances is to give semiotic-cultural psychology the possibility to establish an integrative dialogue with the notion of tradition, in the hermeneutic sense of Hans-Georg Gadamer, as a part of the process of formation and transformation of the symbolic field of action that is culture (Boesch, 1991). The importance of this integration lies in the fact that it opens a way to approach issues concerning the place of tradition as a constraining human cultural construction, which is inherent in the I-other-world relationships. These issues are not very often approached by semiotic-cultural psychology, in spite of its tacitly recognized importance.

For this reason, my objective in this chapter will be to first revisit some central aspects of the notion of *bounded indeterminacy* (Valsiner, 1989/1997), pointing out its ontological relevance, and, second, outline how this concept can be articulated with the notion of tradition, grounded in Gadamer's hermeneutics (1975/1989).

As argued on another occasion, "(...) ontological issues ask for the nature of the subject-other-world relationships that allow the subject's constitution and transformation; they call for the predication of the being, which unfolds in meaningful aspects that distinguish a psychological subject from all other instances that are not it in different psychologies" (Simão, 2016, p.572). ). To that extent, ontological subjects that concern psychology regard the nature of the self and its relationship with others and its world. Those relations allow the self its construction and subjective transformation in that world and also allow the self to symbolically construct that world, amidst sharing and differing with others. The notion of *bounded indeterminacy* is, from this point of view, a concept that ontologically defines Jaan Valsiner's semiotic-cultural psychology because it is one of its angular stones—if not the most important—of its conception about the nature of relations between the subject, others and his or her world, making explicit the conditions of the subject's constitution and transformation in that world and of that world.

## 1 Let's See How

*The origins and relevance of the notion of bounded indeterminacy to the understanding of the nature of human development.*

The notion of *bounded indeterminacy* arises, in its centrality, in *Culture and the Development of Children's Action* (Valsiner, 1997). This work is, according to Valsiner himself, one of his five monographs which represent his main contribution to knowledge (Valsiner, 2014). Afterward, this notion will also be one of the constructive axis of his "cultural-psychological theory of human personality on the basis of semiotics" (Valsiner, 2014, p. 2), developed in *The Guided Mind* (Valsiner, 1998).

In *Culture and the Development of Children's Action*, among the basic assumptions that ground psychological research, especially psychological research about human development, Valsiner (1977) highlights, in the first place, the kinds of the relationships between the person and the environment.

It is about, as Valsiner proposes, relationships that are always of differentiation. However, this differentiation can happen in two ways, characterizing two great assumptions in human development psychology, regarding what we have been calling, contemporarily, I-other-world relationships. The first assumption that orientates some developmental psychologies is that of *exclusive separation*, in which the phenomena that are studied are separated from their contexts, which become irrelevant: "This purified phenomenon is further studied as if it were independent from its context" (Valsiner, 1997, p. 24). The second assumption, in which lies the foundation of Valsiner's psychology, is that of *inclusive separation*, according to which, the phenomena are also differentiated from their contexts, but in ways that continue to make them interdependent with it.

The assumption of *inclusive separation* aligns with the notion of *open systems*, in which the phenomena in study:

"are dependent on exchange relationships with their environments, and their structural organization is maintained, or enhanced, by these relationships. If closed systems can be contextualized as context-free, then open systems by definition are context-dependent" (Valsiner, 1997, p.24)

Still according to Valsiner (1997), the development of the open systems happens under the principle of equifinality, according to which similar events can occur by means of processes quite different from each other. For this reason:

"(...) it is impossible to predict the outcomes of the development of an open system from the starting state of that system because the system's interdependence with its environment and the possibility of different developmental trajectories keep the developing system open to adaptive changes most of the time. Because of open system nature of development, it is not possible conceptualize development as taking place along a fixed, unilinear trajectory. Instead, multiple trajectories of development can be expected theoretically and sought in empirical studies, even if the sets of these trajectories occur within a certain relatively common range" (p. 24)

The perspective of human being as an open system, which is in a relation of *inclusive separation* with the environment, as per the principle of equifinality, is the one responsible for the sustaining of the explanation of how adaptative changes are possible, creating the emergence of new developmental forms over time, in a trajectory of equifinality.

The fact that the human being is an open system in a relation of *inclusive separation* with its environment makes the human development happens through a process of *bounded indeterminacy*<sup>1</sup>, meaning, in synthesis, that the development of the

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<sup>1</sup>According to Valsiner, this notion is closer to the notion of *probabilistic epigenesis*, from Gottlieb, 1976, 1992)(cf. Valsiner, 1997, p.323).

human being is channelled<sup>2</sup> through by the environment, which gradually guides it, directing their possibilities, but not determining them in the linear causality way.

This process ensures that the development of each particular individual follows a singular route, within certain limits, also allowing it to adapt to unexpected changes in the environment. This channelling is made both by the social others and the individual himself, guiding the actions that are given in its singular course in the general predictable direction of the development process (cf. Valsiner, 1997, p. 165).

Therefore, *bounded* has the meaning of *boundary*, that is, *something that limits the indeterminacy of human personal development*.

However, this something, which limits the indeterminacy of personal development, channelling it, is not passively placed or given in the environment, but is constructed in the I-other relations, by the purposeful action of others directed to the I and from the I to them and to oneself. According to Valsiner (1977) in the context of child development:

"The constraint structure is not 'just there' for the child to develop by. It is made up by purposefully acting participants who take the child's current developmental state into account in one or another way.

Second, the child can actively constrain their own development - in the immediate (short) terms or by feed-forward preparation of constraints a longer term ahead. In either case, the child participates actively in its own development by altering its constraining structure. Canalization as the general mechanism of children's action and cognitive development is a gradual process in which earlier child-environment structures guide the child's subsequent in the direction of new structures, which, in turn, canalize the child's progress further". (pp. 165-166)

Valsiner states, thus, in his co-constructive perspective of human development, given by the relation of person-environment, that the social others are an integral part as mediator and, thereby, function to channel development (cf. Valsiner, 1997, p.166).

The most relevant theoretical-methodological predication according to the *bounded indeterminacy* is that, given that "the real action of development takes place at times and in ways that are difficult to observe or invade"—that is, the pre-visibility of a particular fact in the course of development is nearly impossible (Valsiner, 1997, p. 115).

It follows that the intervention of a researcher in any development phenomenon doesn't generate, as a rule, a result that helps confirming or infirming her hypothesis. An intervention "A" in a development phenomenon can generate a series of forms of expression of this phenomenon (B, C ,D, etc....), among which there will occur, probably, a totally new expression, out of its expected ambit, imagined, hypothesized by the researcher. On the other hand, by the principle of equifinality, the general direction of the process will be, however, predictable (cf. Valsiner, 1997, p. 115).

So, the notion of *bounded indeterminacy* plays a role of double importance in the development studies, as it concerns two interrelated and simultaneous levels,

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<sup>2</sup>Valsiner takes this notion of canalization from Waddington's biology (cf. Valsiner, 1997, p. 164).

theoretical and methodological: insofar as the *bounded indeterminacy* guarantees the emergence of novelty within certain limits, in the relation of the person with their environment, this same *bounded indeterminacy* makes the researcher, who is not able to predict and strictly control the results of his intervention in the phenomenon, needs to develop himself, on his side, seeking new forms of comprehension of that phenomenon.

According to Valsiner, the theoretical value of the principle of *bounded indeterminacy* is given by the fact that it accounts for the articulation and regulation between the intra- and inter-psychological levels of the subject in the process of co-construction of their self-development with others, which transforms and reorganizes the subject through their whole life (cf. Valsiner, 1997, p.309).

In the ambit of the self-development, the notion of *bounded indeterminacy* consequently allows Valsiner (1998) to propose that “the process of development is organized by the constant construction and reconstruction of constraints upon the stream of conduct in any corresponding context” (p. 3). It's important to highlight here that we're dealing with an articulation and regulation of the self that gives it *limited autonomy* in its development of new ways in the I-world relation, depending on the *context* in which its actions occurs, being such limitation mostly *temporarily* placed by its other socials (cf. Valsiner, 1998, p.386; my emphases)<sup>3</sup>. In this sense, the notion of *bounded indeterminacy* has directly to do with the question of futurity, once it regards the equifinal trajectories which, contextually, may or may not actualize in the course of each person's development (cf Valsiner, 2013, p. 57, footnote 58).

Last, but not least to our discussion, is the fact that, given Valsiner's perspective, both emergence of new structures and the disappearing of others take place in human development, precisely due to the *bounded indeterminacy* principle.

"Since development entails both the emergence of new structures and disappearance of old ones (involution), transformations at both adjacent (higher, and lower) levels are not only possible but expected. Many structural adaptations of past generations at the neural level (e.g., atavistic non-functional newborn motor reflexes) disappear in ontogeny after showing up for a limited time. The hierarchical order of the developing system is dynamic—it supports openness to novelty at some levels (e.g., psychological) by way of relative fixedness of others (genetic, or neural). Innovation is possible at times at any level of the dynamic hierarchy—but it is unlikely to occur simultaneously at all levels. It is through the coordination of the openness and closedness of the hierarchy that development is buffered against excesses of novelty—development follows the principle of bounded indeterminacy (Valsiner, 1997)". (Valsiner, 2005, p.3)

The principle of *bounded indeterminacy* is, therefore, the axis of subject predication in Jaan Valsiner's semiotic-cultural psychology. This predication makes it possible for us to integrate the role of tradition as an inherently and channelling human cultural construction from a semiotic-cultural perspective.

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<sup>3</sup>According to Valsiner himself, this dynamicity and temporary, contextual character of the notion of *bounded indeterminacy* is borrowed from the field theory of Kurt Lewin (Valsiner, 1986/1997, p. 183).

## *Approaching Tradition in Valsiner's Approach*

Hermeneutics has been present in Jaan Valsiner's work. Previously, we've also opened a dialogue between aspects of Gadamer's, Boesch's and Valsiner's *oeuvres*, which was grounded on the role of hermeneutics in their works, explaining the different directions taken in each (cf. Simão, 2005). It is not necessary to repeat that debate but simply to remind that, insofar as each one of them:

"sees both culture and individual as being constructed by meanings as well as constructing them, the interpretation of meanings, that is, the task of hermeneutics, will play a central role in understanding and reflecting on culture-individual relationships". (Simão, 2005, p. 553)

In Valsiner's case, the genetic and historical-cultural tradition from which he starts, to which he belongs, and which has been co-constructing in a dialogue with this tradition, channels it (in Valsiner's own meaning, 1998) to a theoretical-methodological reconstruction directed to the research of fundamental principles. The meaning of the individual action, in the context of cultural mediation, one of human's semiotic regulators, will be therefore interpreted according to those fundamental principles. Hence, his objective is to reach a coherent and generalized comprehension of the part-whole transformative relations which take place in the intra-psychological system and whose system both culture and the other are integral parts.

In the meta-theoretical level, to Valsiner, the universal knowledge of processes in general, and of the symbolic human processes in particular, are grounded on the creative synthesis of the researchers about introspective and extrospective experiences, theirs and others', in the I-world relations. On that account, on various occasions, he strongly criticizes the reduction that has been made of hermeneutics to post-modern view advocating there the impossibility or dispensable character of the universal knowledge (cf., e.g. Valsiner 1998, pp. 192-194). However, to him, the divergence between subject and experimenter, inherent to the hermeneutic processes of knowledge construction, brings the benefit of allowing the emergence of new relevant phenomena to be studied:

"The function of research methods in the evocation of the emergence of novelty makes co-constructivist methodology close to the concerns of hermeneutically oriented researchers. In the hermeneutic process of knowledge construction, the moments of sudden mutual divergence of communication between experimenter and subject may give rise to the relevant phenomena to be investigated (Hermans, 1991, 1996; Hermans & Bonarius, 1991a, 1991b; Hermans & Kempen, 1995; Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992). This hermeneutic process is dialogic in nature - irrespective of whether that dialogue takes place within the intra or interpersonal communication process. It entails constant construction of semiotic differences, which include repetitively new versions of phenomena (...) When this approach is applied to the process of experimenter-subject relations, the objectivity of any research effort is an hermeneutic process - not pre-given by starting conditions (of "objective methods", etc.)". (Valsiner, 1998, p. 303-4)

However, beyond those places, there still may be another one for the hermeneutics in Valsiner's account. This place is opened up by the notion of *bounded*

*indeterminacy*, being able to integrate the hermeneutic comprehension of tradition in semiotic-cultural psychology.

The conception of culture as semiosis, in Valsiner, is the key point for the comprehension of his propositions regarding individual development in the core of self-culture relations. In this process, the systems of cultural meaning, both collective and personal, overdetermine the subjective experience, in a two-way movement, in which the subject chooses and makes adjustments in the cultural messages. Thus, the subject becomes the potential agent of change in itself, generating new messages that could be selectively apprehended by himself in another moment, or by other subjects with whom he interacts directly and indirectly, and so on (cf., e.g. Valsiner, 1998).

The conception of culture is, therefore, of a processual interactive bidirectional structure, keeping a relation of *bounded indeterminacy* with the individuals. In the present discussion, it means that, in the subject-culture relation, neither subject, nor culture, are processual structures totally opened or totally closed, but partially and circumstantially opened to one another's interventions at the same time that they are conservative. As Valsiner (1986/1997) points out, it is this characteristic of *bounded indeterminacy* that guarantees the systems the possibility of, simultaneously, continuity and change.

Valsiner's conception leads us to the directing process of the pre-conceptions by the cultural tradition, as in Gadamer's work. In both cases, the approach of the subject in the relation with others is, from the beginning, instructed by his pre-conceptions that will be reviewed and relocated selectively, in the course of the proper relation, projecting transformations.

More recently, in *An Invitation to Cultural Psychology*, Valsiner (2013) indicates the possibility and pertinence of a closer dialogue between the hermeneutic notion of tradition and semiotic-cultural psychology that is possible if we take into account that the notion of *bounded indeterminacy* acts as a background making this dialogue possible.

Right from the beginning, Valsiner (2013) tells us that "Creating innovations is the main tradition of the human ways of living" (p. 10). Far ahead, he synthesises how this happens:

"The cultural-historical context of any feature of human lives involves historical traditions which—by their trajectories in the past—orient the macro-social unit towards its future. These trajectories are not linear—in fact they may be non-monotonic and possess cyclical features". (Valsiner, 2013, p. 220) <sup>4</sup>

In these passages, Valsiner (2013) leads us to the macro-social aspect of historical tradition, granting it great value as in the ambit of the emergence of novelty in the human beings. It also leads us to the ambit of temporality and of the non-linear processes, but cyclical of those social innovations that are human tradition. It

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<sup>4</sup>The term "tradition" is mentioned 53 times in the work (Valsiner, 2013). However, we believe that these two moments are the most significant for the dialogue we intend to establish here between the notion of *bounded indeterminacy* and the one of tradition.

remains, however, the open space to a view more directed to the tradition in its aspect of *bounded indeterminacy* and in the more contextual ambit of the here and now of the relation of the self with its others.

In order to enter this still open space, a deepening of Gadamer's notion of tradition is relevant.

In synthetic ways and according to Warnke (2012):

"In Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, tradition designates the historically pre-given. As socialized human beings we are always already immersed in particular ways of coping with our world. We possess certain forms of practical knowledge, do things in certain ways, and take certain concepts and conceptual relations for granted. These forms of knowing and acting function as deeply rooted pre-agreements, or what Gadamer calls prejudices, that orient our further explorations". (p.6)

So, tradition in Gadamerian hermeneutics is implied in the personal formation (*Bildung*) that takes place in collective culture (see also Brinkmann, this volume). The "voice of the past" presentifies itself for the I, through symbolic actions of the other, creating demands for the personal-cultural fitting, that in turn alters their horizons (Gadamer, 1975/1989) and, as a consequence, their future possibilities. This other can also be myself, where the dialogical demands between the selves (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1995). Therefore, the hermeneutic relation with the past through tradition is addressed to the future, in the sense that it canalizes, under a relationship of *bounded indeterminacy*, the future possibilities of the self in the cultural field of action (Boesch, 1991).

The tradition speaks from the past, as a cultural voice, but it doesn't fit perfectly in the present, because the past won't replicate in the present. In this sense, facing-off tradition the self sees itself before the urgency of reconstructing tradition in the present, which means that tradition operates in terms of *bounded indeterminacy* regarding its projected future.

As for tradition operates according to the principle of bounded indeterminacy, it imposes to the self to deal with temporality in two interconnected ways (Simão, 2015). First, once the contents that make interpellations in the present will only be comprehensible through a transformative process of oneself (*Bildung*), which is at the same time a transformation of those contents that come from tradition. In short, it deals with becoming. Second, it will impose itself on the subject to deal with their limits, their finitude: the person experienced "knows the limits of any prevision and the insecurity of every plan", "knows that it's not the lord of time, nor of the future" (Gadamer, 1975/1996 p.433).

What Valsiner proposes as *bounded indeterminacy* is present in the hermeneutic dialogue that the I and the other go placing themselves sometimes as enablers, sometimes as restrictors of the dialogue's course.

As highlighted by Grodin (2002), the comprehension implies an agreement in the conversation, through the articulation of the words, that are so both and always of the I, and of the other, to whom the I aims to understand. That's why, in Gadamerian hermeneutics the dialogue is a field of tensional relation between the past, present and future, between possible and impossible, but desired, expected.

If, in Gadamerian hermeneutics, on the one hand, the lack of consensus validates the authenticity of the other, because it confronts the subject with the experience of negation, on the other hand, the full consensus still remains possible and necessary to be reached, meaning the true comprehension. But, in any case, the rupture of the expectation related to the consensus and the permanent search for comprehension leaves the I and the other in a permanent reconstructive task in dialogue, consequently addressed to the future.

As Harrist and Richardson (2011) point out, the human communication “involves an exquisite, quintessentially human, sometimes almost unbearable tension” (p. 345), once it involves beliefs that regard our self-definition and values that we cherish, in which we invest affectionately with intensity, and that may sound to us as partial and distorted in the voices of others. On the other hand, as said by those same authors, as the same occurs from us regarding the others:

“we need not just to compromise and get along with others, but to learn from the past, others, or other cultures. Thus, in matters closest to our hearts, we depend greatly upon these others, their insights, their critical challenge of our points of view, and their beneficent influence”. (Harrist & Richardson, 2011, p. 345)

This process is characterized by the dynamics of the hermeneutic circle. In a few words, it's about a construction of meaning in which the whole is understood by the individual and the individual by the whole. This process of meaning construction is ruled by expectations derived from the context previous to the encounter with what one sought to understand (it is noted here the past-present relation). Such expectations can, on the other hand, be rectified, if the object to be comprehended so demands, in such a way as to readjust each other, expectations and object found (notice here a reciprocal *bounded indeterminacy* created by the I and the other). This way, the comprehension converges in a unity of thought, from the expectation of the meaning (it is noted here the present-future relation in the adjustment and creation of the new expectation, in a spiral movement). The criteria for the correct comprehension will be the confluence of all the details in a whole.

All of this is possible thanks to the anticipation of the meaning of the I when relating interpretatively (hermeneutically) with what it seeks to comprehend. If, on the one hand, the meaning constructions are ruled by the derived expectations of context previous to the encounter of what is sought to comprehend (the preconceptions, in Gadamer's sense), those expectations will be, on the other hand, rectified by the demands placed by the object that one seeks to comprehend. Again here, the centrality of the relation past-future, presentified.

Our pre-conceptions, brought from tradition, are not a fixed heritage of opinions and values that form our present horizon of comprehension, as they are constantly challenged by the horizons of the other, brought in communication, and by the proper symbolic displacement of the voice of tradition in the possibilities of interpretation of the present. Thus, both the voice of the other and this displacement of tradition in present exert the role of *bounded indeterminacy* in our interpretations of here and now, allowing some (and not other) plans related to the future, motivating some (and not other) imaginations to the future, making us seek to transform certain

(and not other) direction seeking to transform our I-other-world relations. All of the difficulty and affective-cognitive effort that this process anchored in the *bounded indeterminacy* requires makes the emergence of novelty, in Valsiner's terms, a fact to celebrate.

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**Part III**  
**The Semiotic Mind**

# A Stroll Through the Birthplace of Signs



Carlos Cornejo 

## 1 Introduction

The core insight shared by cultural psychologists is that psychic life can only be understood by describing people's overt behavior in such a way that we can capture why they are performing this specific movement. "That person raising an arm over there is a cop directing transit." "That woman standing next to the river shore holding something in her hands is fishing." "That man standing in a field is a footballer who happens to be offside." Each time one makes this kind of description an overall interpretive framework for that behavior is being laid out. That person raising an arm could be waving or straightening their jacket, among other things. To understand that someone's movement means directing the passing drivers is to provide observed behavior within an interpretative framework defining one's own and other's action possibilities. It also sets expectations about possible events. Such description not only captures someone's behavior, but its meaning. In these descriptions, we are not interested in the musculoskeletal trajectory of the body, but it gives us clues of what a person is actually doing. In short, we are interested in people's movement as *action*, not merely as *behavior*.

Still, it should be noted that framing the meaning or sense of an action is related to a socially accepted background. Whether individual or collective, our actions become meaningful within socially constructed comprehensive frameworks. I understand someone is a cop directing transit because I am acquainted with cities, streets, people, work, human transportation, the state's public force, transit regulation, and so forth. The framework wherein I understand observed action does not come from a made-up personal illusion. It is rather a framework that I share with my

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community, inasmuch I can behave coherently within it and assume that we all fundamentally agree.<sup>1</sup>

Therein lies the cultural and epistemological schism that divides the natural from the human sciences (social sciences playing an awkward intermediary role). Natural sciences assume the existence of a reality that can be neutrally described and objectivated since it holds complete independence in regard to the observer. This assumption corresponds to what Sellars (1956) aptly called “the myth of the given.” Human sciences (as in the case of cultural psychology) work under the premise that “the given” can have a sense of reality and objectivity only within certain socially constructed frameworks of meaning, for every perception is experiential; “all seeing is seeing as [...]” (Vesey, 1956, 114). To perceive something is to place it in an intricate bundle of meaning – the *semiosphere* according to Yuri Lotman (2005), which makes it both intelligible for the perceiver and a social object.

A central dimension of meaning is the symbolic. A meaning framework provides sense to objects, events, and movements in the physical and social world. Someone raising his arm in the middle of the street leads me to something distinctive of such behavior: it is a cop directing transit. Meaning grants access to a deeper dimension of exposed reality. The meaning of overt behavior is not exhausted by what I can infer optically; meaning points toward something denser or deeper that I do access in overt behavior. The arm’s movement *stands for* a transit sign. The property of *standing for* something else corresponds exactly to the definition of a *sign*. Because of this, it is common that the human sciences refer to their field of study as *the symbolic*, countering natural sciences studying reality as a given.

Another dimension of the meaning framework is experiential. It is scarcely addressed by cultural psychology, which has chosen to emphasize the symbolic dimension of social reality in order to take distance in regard to the tenets of a logical-positivist epistemology. To enter the symbolic world supposes *feeling* it. To perceive a cop directing transit (as opposed to an organism extending one of its upper limbs) *not only* supposes being part of a symbolic frame but feeling aware of my experience. I might feel angry or upset as part of the State’s hypocrisy regarding police abuse of power, or relief as social norms are being respected, or an ambivalent mixture of both. Whatever it might be, meaning-making appeals to a felt interiority – a *lived experience*. Throughout the history of human sciences, the acknowledgment and description of the experienced dimension involved in meaning-making has been reprised by the romantic, vitalist, and later phenomenological traditions (Graumann, 1982).

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<sup>1</sup>Elsewhere I have argued that this framework of common sense does not work as propositional contents that we *know*. Instead, we take the framework for granted, i.e., we *trust* in people (Cornejo, 2013).

## 2 Mind the Gap Between Semiology and Semiotics

It is an historical and intellectual oddity that the *science of the sign* was formulated simultaneously and yet apart around the same period of time (toward the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century) in different parts of the world. On the one hand, Ferdinand de Saussure proposes *semiology* as a branch of modern linguistics in Switzerland. On the other hand, Charles S. Peirce advances *semiotics* as a science of the signs in the United States. Despite them sharing its object of study, their definitions of the sign remain radically different. There is literally an ocean separating both approaches. As pointed out by Taylor (2016), there is a clear tension between rationalist (viz., Hobbes, Locke, Condillac) and organicist (brought forth by Hamann, Herder, and Humboldt, among others) approaches to language from the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century.

Saussure's intellectual aim is to provide new epistemological grounds to erect "modern linguistics," as he referred to it. Undoubtedly, the scientific study of language is not kickstarted by Saussure. Saussure's unease was raised by the status of linguistics at the time, which unlike other social sciences had not been able to gain independence regarding philology and literary studies (psychology and sociology had already become relatively autonomous from philosophy). To achieve his aim, Saussure defines the discipline's object of study as *langue*; an invariable, static system, prone to objective analysis (*langue* contrasting the more idiosyncratic, idiomatic aspects of *parole*). Deeply influenced by the predominance of positivism in continental Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, Saussure develops a theory that understands language as an abstract, unchanging, complex system that is susceptible to being broken down into more elementary, mechanical parts. The fundamental unit of such a supra-individual system is the *sign*. Similarly, Saussure's concept of sign is a modern lecture of the scholastic definition *aliquid pro aliquo*: a sign is the indivisible totality composed by signifier and signified, the former corresponding to an acoustic image, the latter to a concept. Despite Saussure's understanding of the sign as a psychophysical phenomenon and therefore its need for verification in a speaker's awareness, he affirms that the indivisibility of the two components of the sign is derived from it being part of *langue* as a supra-individual system. The individual mind is simply the stage for a noncontingent association for the individual; it depends on the linguistic community to which the individual belongs. The consequences of a positivistic approach to the sign become more evident: to Saussurean semiology, social meaning is an objective entity that remains independent from the individual's stream of consciousness.

Charles S. Peirce proceeded from a completely different theoretical heritage. Despite his critical stance toward Emerson's transcendentalism – enormously influential in the US nineteenth-century intellectual landscape – Peirce inherited his developmental approach to nature, which in turn is based on German post Kantian *Naturphilosophie*. Consequently, his concept of sign is grounded in a terrain where meaning is a continuous flux and undergoes constant change. Peirce does not present the sphere of meaning as sectioned in discrete, stable parts, and therefore his

notion of sign is dynamic, namely, contextually and personally variable. To Peirce, the sign is a unit comprised of three elements:

A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representamen. (Peirce, 1932a, p. 135)

Saussurean semiology and Peircean semiotics share the conception of a sign standing for something else; but in semiotics the sign does not appear *from nowhere* (Nagel, 1986), but “in some respect or capacity.” For Peirce, a sign does not stand for its object “in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea [...] the *ground* of the *representamen*.” Consequently, every sign expresses its object from a particular standpoint, not from an omniscient view. This position embodies Peirce’s version of “all seeing is seeing as”; a doctrine that Peirce posed at an epistemological level and called “fallibilism.” Peircean semiotics defines the sign as having a dynamic, continuously expansive character. In this regard, both Peirce and contemporarily William James understand the symbolic as undergoing permanent development in time; the symbolic is “[a]nything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*” (Peirce, 1932b, p. 169; italics in the original). The meaning of a gesture or an expression unfolds in infinite semiosis, where the object referred to by a sign is upheld by a new sign, and so forth. The sense human motion or utterances bear within a hermeneutical framework is semiotically constructed; this is in a continuous flux of triadic signs.

Semiology and semiotics are both involved in the *linguistic turn*, a noticeable movement toward the end of the nineteenth century that will have repercussions on most of twentieth-century philosophy (Rorty, 1967). The linguistic turn is presented as a philosophical method to address key questions paying particular attention to the language that is being used to formulate and answer them. This gives a central role to the definition of sign and becomes a central pursuit in philosophy, logic, and epistemology. To the late nineteenth-century human sciences, an adequate definition of the sign offered a chance to deal with meaning without falling into the dead-ends of early nineteenth-century German idealism. In fact, the will to escape from the kind of abstraction reached by Hegelian idealism is a factor contributing to provide further reach to positivism in the incipient “social sciences” and to the experimental approach in nineteenth-century psychology. A theory of the sign would entail a second chance to build an actual human science, namely, a science able to study meaning – a condition to truly understand human reality. Examining language and other signs seemed like a much more promissory path for human sciences compared to studying abstract entities such as the History (with a capital H). This vantage point would allow human scientists to stick to the object at stake (meaning) while maintaining scientific standards, instead of speculative ones.

But as previously shown, semiology and semiotics propose two significantly different programs of what a theory of the sign should be. For Saussure, the sign leads

into both an ontological division between signifier and signified – which have a fixed relationship to one another – and language being a set entity with complete independence regarding a similarly fixed reality. Saussure deals with objective semantic links in abstract linguistic communities, hence Voloshinov’s (1929/1973) choice to refer to this approach as “abstract objectivism.” In this context, the signified exhausts the signifier “in all its respects,” using Peirce’s phrasing. Since the Saussurean sign is inscribed in the *langue* system, its meaning has no epistemic variability. Briefly put, it is formulated from God’s point of view. Contrastingly, for Peirce meaning is a sign that participates in a continuously flowing current and varies according to the context and point of view of someone partaking in semiosis. Hence, semiotics has strived to synthesize the notion of development of *Naturphilosophie* and the critique toward the excesses of German idealism.

### 3 The Semiotic Psyche

Jaak Valsiner has rescued Charles S. Peirce’s semiotics to the benefit of contemporary psychology. Valsiner has contributed to psychology in the same vein Karl-Otto Apel contributed to philosophy or Jürgen Habermas contributed to sociology. From the 1990s onward, Valsiner has been a central proponent of a continuously co-constructed vision of the mind and society (Valsiner, 1987, 1998; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). With an in-depth knowledge of the polyphonic historical-cultural theory (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994), Valsiner captured the dead-ends Vygotsky himself encountered when attempting to build a historical-materialist theory adapting the Saussurean concept of sign. Vygotsky was profoundly influenced by Saussurean semiology when putting together a genetic theory of consciousness. That is analogous to build a landscape out of photographs; the former being a moving whole, the latter being static and partial. Instead of adopting a convenient, yet uncritical theoretical position,<sup>2</sup> Valsiner found in Peircean semiotics the theoretical toolkit that would allow overcoming the dead-ends semiology leads to when applied to developmental psychology. Peircean semiotics allowed Valsiner to shape what might be his most important legacy to developmental psychology: the notion of development itself.

There is a profound conceptual difference between studying developmental psychology and understanding psychological phenomena from a truly *developmental*

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<sup>2</sup>“Followers of any theoretical system are dangerous. They turn their cherished theory into an orthodoxy--to be followed, rather than developed further. As a result what was a tool for thought becomes an object to cherish. The cherishers become proud of their ardent following of the traditions--they claim to be ‘Vygotskian’ or ‘Piagetian’ or ‘Skinnerian’--any other variety but being themselves. Some even consider themselves to be ‘Valsinerians’--a step that I observe with mild irony and amusement. I certainly refuse to be ‘Valsinerian’ myself--it would mean that I accept having finished my journey as a traveler in the world of ideas, and become just a follower. The only way I see how to follow Valsiner is not to follow him--and I hope to continue my efforts in *that* kind of following” (Valsiner, 2017, p. 117; italics in the original).

approach (Valsiner, 2000). An actual notion of development prioritizes taking a look at nature, biological organisms, and the mind as undergoing constant change and transformation, so that there is an accuracy to understanding that things and beings *are* not, but continuously *become* something else. Sometimes such developmental processes extend over long periods of chronological time (i.e., geological changes), sometimes in very short periods (i.e., the microgenesis of human understanding (Werner & Kaplan, 1963)). However, independently of chronological time, Valsiner's proposal of development supposes an epistemological turn where *to be* is understood as *being*. To my knowledge, there is no contemporary psychologist that having fully understood what an actual developmental perspective truly involves has consistently unveiled the sense in which contemporary developmental psychology is deeply a-developmental. A stage-like description might be a necessary condition to put forth a sound psychology of human development, but clearly is not enough. As the photo collage is not equivalent to the landscape, a classificatory theory cannot be an actual developmental theory. This insight, again, we owe to Jaan Valsiner.

Relatedly yet distinctively to that idea, Valsiner brings into the light the equally deep insight on the temporality of human awareness. Once the implicit notion of development in Peirce's semiotics is applied to human developmental phenomena, the temporal unfolding of felt experience comes to the fore. However, this is not the chronological, objective time that experimental psychology measures inspired by Fechner's psychophysics. Instead it is felt time, namely, the feeling that experience involves a temporality. Here, Valsiner brings back the Bergsonian notion of *durée*: from a *psychological* standpoint, psychic phenomena take place over a background of felt time – this is what is meant by *temporality*. All the descriptions Valsiner provides of the semiotic dynamics characteristic of human awareness must be understood as the unfolding of a vital feeling of time passing, which he refers to as “the irreversibility of time.” Acknowledging the temporality of human experience also leads to recognize its uniqueness and irreplicability. Each psychological phenomenon (perception, insights, communicational and interpretative acts) is unique and irreplicable.

Semiotic-cultural theory triggers a semiotic turn in psychology. It also leads to the emergence of a subfield (cultural psychology) that will study social meaning in semiotic terms. Valsiner thus overcomes the limitations of a static and abstract model of the sign that perpetuates a schism between the individual and the societal level. Instead, Valsiner introduces a dynamic concept that enables to establish a co-constitutive link between the individual and the societal. The existence of the social and its presence in language, customs, and practices configures the personal level. The individual mind cannot be separated from social semiotic processes that configure it. But the individual does exist. The personal is not merely the abstract, ontologically independent loci for hypostatized signifier-signified links. Hence, it is relevant to set forth a *co-constructivism* (Vorderer & Valsiner, 1999) where one accepts both that the mind is socially shaped and that the mind shapes society. Otherwise, either of two antithetical positions will be assumed: whether society, history, or culture are the only ones determining the individual mind (by means of

signs or norms, which are then understood as entailing submissiveness), or there is only an individual mind that leaves society and culture as individual operations. An adequate interpretation of the concept of semiosis allows us to overcome this antinomy, assuming that people perpetuate but also continuously recreate social processes.

#### 4 The Reduction of Semiosis to the Symbolic

There is another difference between semiology and semiotics that needs to be taken into account. The former is a foundational block for a linguistic system theory, while the latter belongs to an overall theory of knowledge. Consequently, semiology in its original Saussurean rendition delimits the realm of signs to that of the linguistic system. Meanwhile, to Peirce a sign is anything, either a linguistic form or not, that stands there for something else in some regard. This distinction is fundamental to understand the discrepancies between both stances concerning the sign. At a first glance, semiology seems to have more modest aims than semiotics, and therefore, its applicability seems restricted to what Saussure called *langue* – namely, the object of modern linguistics. This impression, however, can be misleading when considering that the poststructuralist school (heir to Saussurean semiology) extended the concept of linguistic system and ended up covering the “realm of the real.” Under Derrida’s “everything is a text” slogan, poststructuralism equated language and semiosphere, *langue*, and common sense. This reduction has fatal consequences for any *psychology*, even for cultural psychology. The spreading of language onto any kind of meaning leads to people becoming lost in social systems. Hence social determinism befalls on persons, and the possibility of unique and irreplicable experience is eradicated, for it has been previously fabricated in the *épistémè* of those holding social power.

The semiotic concept of *sign* includes language but it is far from exhausted by it. The linguistic sign corresponds to a *symbol*, a particular kind of sign in the Peirce’s threefold typology of signs (Peirce, 1932b). *Icons* stand in some respect for the object they represent by similarity. A photograph or a pictorial representation can be icons of their original model. *Indexes* are signs that show its object by physical or causal contact with it. Smoke can be an index of fire, as an arrow can be a direction for a traveler to follow. Finally, *symbols* represent some aspect of their object by convention or use. This would be the case of linguistic signs, according to Peirce.

Equating meaning to a linguistic system reduces the former to its symbolic dimension and neglects or distorts its felt dimension. The “thickness” of conscious experience, its temporality, and uniqueness become diluted insofar the mind plays the role of a methodological hypothesis that allows social reality to unfold symbolically (or “normatively,” in current lingo). But this methodological hypothesis is far from constituting subjectivity properly. Using John Searle’s famous thought experiment, if the mind is the passive holder of alien symbols, one could not distinguish between a person who understands Chinese from a person who does not but who

was instructed to rightly proffer specific utterances (that turn to be Chinese symbols) in response to questions written in Chinese. When human psychism is reduced to a canvas wherein social symbols are deployed, the felt sense every speaker has of their own language is lost from sight. People would then become the mere embodiment of social conventions, passively incorporating and reproducing their development. For cultural psychology, the issues brought up by a reduction of the semiotic universe to the symbolic are tangible. On the one hand, social determinism becomes the only possible way to address the individual-social relationship. As Nietzsche announced God's death, Foucault preached the death of the individual. The uniqueness of personal experience is obliterated. On the other hand, access to a *psychological* explanation of semiosis (and of symbolism, more specifically) is banned, insofar as the mind is presented as a mere housing (not the creating and changing force) for external symbols. Intimacy, ipseity, and self-identity are banished from the human sciences as they supposedly bear modern overtones. Yet their roots sink far deeper than modernity.

Nevertheless, in an odd case of cognitive epistemopathology (Koch, 1981), a sizable part of cultural psychologists has enthusiastically embraced post-structuralist theories in hopes to find refuge from the banishing of the symbolic world in mainstream psychology. But they seem to be unaware that the reduction of meaning to symbolic social convention supposes to deny human qualities like agency and subjectivity. A worrying number of cultural psychologists show a quasi-religious adherence to a theoretical paradigm that ultimately denies personal faculties such as freedom and moral pondering, which are necessary to appraise scientific theories, among other things. This is a conspicuous case of performative self-contradiction. Could this be considered as a case of Stockholm syndrome brought to the scientific arena?

Still, contemporary semiotic approaches tend to narrow down Peirce's constellation of signs to *symbols*, neglecting *icons* and *indexes*. This omission is vastly relevant. Once personal life becomes reduced to social conventions, psychological phenomena outside the reach of language turn out to be *semiotically* inexistent: in C.S. Peirce's terms, they would be pragmatically inconsequential. This assertion overtly contradicts everyday empirical evidence. People experience themselves in temporal continuity; people have feelings and make decisions, relevant or trivial; they consider their effects; and so on. Peirce himself acknowledges the unique and non-conventional quality feelings as part of the infinite semiosis:

In all cases [the Interpretant] includes feelings; for there must, at least, be a sense of comprehending the meaning of the sign. If it includes more than mere feeling, it must evoke some kind of effort. It may include something besides, which, for the present, may be vaguely called "thought". I term these three kinds of interpretant the "emotional", the "energetic", and the "logical" interpretants. (Peirce, 1998, p. 409)

Along these very lines, Peirce unequivocally distinguishes semantic aspects of signs from their emotional and energetic aspects. *Interpretants* – those signs that indicate in which sense a *sign* stands for its *object* – include "feelings" and "some kind of effort" that Peirce calls "energy." Including "feelings" as a kind of interpretant is

justified since there is *a sense of comprehending the meaning of the sign*. This statement is extremely relevant, since it entails including sentience *in* semiotics. This dimension of the semiotic universe acknowledges that personal experiences have a felt (and not only reflexive) depth, which is already excluded in semiology or in semiotics when the latter is narrowed down to its symbolic dimension. Furthermore, Peirce includes effort-like “energies” among the possible interpretants. This component keeps pointing toward an experiential (phenomenological) dimension that ends up being negated (or distorted as discourse or text) in variants of social science (and cultural psychology) that restrict the semiotic universe to the ensemble of linguistic signs that Peirce calls *symbols*. Our perception of the world produces a myriad of reactions in our entire being. We do not only reflect upon what it means for someone to be at a crossroads raising their hand. We see them wearing a uniform. The uniform brings repulsion or fear, calmness, or anxiety. The totality of our body, our muscles tense up or relax accordingly. There is no neutrality in such science; it is loaded with valuations that we access semiotically, even without inner speech. All our world encounters are primarily semiotic while remaining non-symbolic (Lassègue, Rosenthal & Visetti, 2009; Rojas, 2021).

The distinction between semiosis and symbolism reveals affective and dispositional phases that precede symbolic phases both ontogenetically and microgenetically (Rosenthal, 2004). Their acknowledgment is fundamental to bring back a personal level that is constituted alongside the social. Differently put, a disregard for proto-symbolic semiosis leads to the impossibility for an actual cultural *psychology* – we are just left with an expanding sociology that colonizes the personal. It is in this sense that Jaan Valsiner’s theoretical approach is *semiotic*: semiosis makes meaning tangible, but only if it rejects the premises for social determinism. To achieve this, both the social *and* personal experiences need to be understood semiotically. Peirce wrote “Man is a sign,” not “Man is a symbol.”

The emphasis that a large portion of contemporary cultural psychology puts on the social character of the mind risks overlooking the proto-symbolic dimension of human experience. Symbols offer a conventional representation of reality; they represent an object via convention. Think of the wooden artifact to smoke that we refer to in English with the word “pipe.” We can say that the English word “pipe” represents the corresponding object, as the German *Pfeife* and the Italian *pipa*. I can even write these words down, so any literate person can read from these ink marks “pipe.” In this case, the written word “pipe” also represents the object. Besides we can draw the object. In this case, we have another *representation* of it. I can also learn variations of sign language and discover that they all have a hand gesture to refer to a pipe. Moreover, ever since Locke’s notion about the “internal perception” was made available, many psychologists and philosophers are prone to affirm that our perception of the object called “pipe” is already a representation of it. Despite the remarkable differences between all these cases, we use one single word to embrace them, namely, “representation.” Thus, “representation” indicates a kind of formal relationship between something that stands for another thing. It is a *formal connection* because the word “representation” in itself is not a queue to discriminate between the varieties of “stand for” relationships.

It is still crucial to distinguish at least between general forms of semiosis and specifically *human* semiosis.<sup>3</sup> Peirce does it by expanding semiosis beyond symbols to include feelings and bodily dispositions. More specifically, Susanne K. Langer (1942) introduces the distinction between representational and presentational modes of what she calls “symbolism” (tantamount to what I have treated as *semiosis* so far):

Language in the strict sense is essentially discursive [...]. The meanings given through language are successively understood, and gathered into a whole by the process called discourse; the meanings of all other symbolic elements that compose a larger, articulate symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure. Their very functioning as symbols depends on the fact that they are involved in a simultaneous, integral presentation. This kind of semantic may be called ‘presentational symbolism,’ to characterize its essential distinction from discursive symbolism, or ‘language’ proper. (Langer, 1942, pp. 96f.)

This distinction plays a fundamental role in identifying the psychological varieties of semiosis. Alongside discursive symbolism provided by social language, there is a rich semiotic field that sustains meaning as a *gestalt*, “through their relations within the total structure.” People are not only symbol carriers; they have a qualitative participation in their *Umwelt*, where feelings, impressions, physiognomic perceptions, and corporal dispositions play a key role. These proto-symbolic aspects of human life are also part of human understanding, and, consequently, they belong in a semiotic approach to human life.

The distinction between symbolic and proto-symbolic semiosis comes to the fore when we realize that human meaning corresponds to *lived experience*. Semiosis is motion, as James’s notion of “stream of thought,” Bergson’s “duration,” and Valsiner’s “irreversibility of time” show. Consequently, an adequate semiotic account of meaning should focus on the genesis and life of symbols, rather than assuming their external determination by social norms as if they would somehow precede their expression. Instead of putting symbols inside the individual mind as if they were external pieces of meaning to be decoded, a semiotic inspired cultural *psychology* should bring to the foreground the fact that semiosis is a genetic process. This leads us into the inquiry for the birthplace of signs.

## 5 Searching for the Origin of Signs

The question about the origin of signs is approached in radically different ways depending on whether we choose to understand language as a pre-given system or as part of organic development. In the former case, the inquiry translates into addressing the question of child language acquisition (or better yet, addressing the development of the symbolic function). In this framework, language is conceived

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<sup>3</sup>Although it would be a digression from the main issue here, it is still important to note the some of the work done on animal semiosis in general, which includes but is not limited to the human species (Portmann, 1953; von Uexküll, 1957; Buytendijk, 1958).

from the very outset as a system that exists separately from the individual, designed to communicate ideas. This approach follows from *the reduction of language to symbols*. When the question about the origins of language is replaced with the question concerning the moment people are able to handle symbols successfully, the realm of signs is again reduced to symbols (albeit they might be the most complex ones), and the role of earlier phases in semiosis – manifest in feelings and dispositions – is downplayed.

A genuinely developmental approach on the origins of semiosis seeks for the situations and conditions under which signs are gestated. Meaning has never been a static entity floating somewhere in a Platonic parallel domain, ready to be learned, absorbed or internalized by children. Instead, the locus of language is human interaction. Meaning emerges and is constructed, reconstructed, and modified in real face to face interactions. Any other kind of human interaction (from written communications to virtual videoconferences) is derivative regarding the anthropological basic *I-You-It* relationship, enabling us to share experiences in a common world. An indication for those looking for the birthplace of signs is to turn toward the minimal social encounter instead of staying at the abstract domain of social conventions. Signs dwell in real interactions between people and far from being merely activated or manifested; they are *recreated* and *modified* in concrete social encounters.

As Bühler (1934/2011) and Werner and Kaplan (1963) described, this minimal social encounter involves three vertices: the speaker, the addressee, and the referential object. Speech acquires its meaning within this interactional space. Notice, however, that if we do not overcome semiology's communication model (and its heir, information theory), the description of the triadic minimal social situation will be of little help. *From a developmental standpoint, the original function of speech – both ontogenetically and phylogenetically – is not communication but sharing lived experience.* Utterances proffered in social interaction are not intended to be “message transmitters.” The *communication* metaphor implies that there is an unbridgeable gap between two people, although they might be chatting next to each other. But to send messages that should be decoded by a counterpart is quite different from attempting that my partner grasps the way I feel concerning this or that matter in particular and, consequently, that she *sees* the way I see it. When we do not impose the communication framework on the minimal social situation and instead remain open to observe what goes on, people's organismic involvement comes to the fore, manifested, for instance, in gesturing and prosodic singing. In short, the observation of this primordial interactive situation shows their engagement in sharing lived experience.

An utterance is always set in a context shared by speaker and addressee. But an utterance is only a small (consonant or dissonant) part of a wide array of feelings and dispositions they have experienced and upon which they can draw by virtue of sharing *some common ground*. To understand what someone means, the addressee will draw on various kinds of tacit clues: poignant features in the environment, her facial expression, gaze direction, vocal pitches and inflections, muscular tension, and so forth. Of course, the addressee will also draw on someone's words, but understanding her utterances considerably exceeds the conventional semantic

meaning she provided. The addressee can “see what she means” despite the “incorrect” use of some of her words or despite not knowing the precise meaning of a particular word she used (and what was understood might only come to the for later, when pointed out specifically by a third party).

This means that symbolic content is just one dimension of semiotic processes, and not the deepest one. In the *I-You-It* situation, it is pristine that symbol formation is motivated by a proto-symbolic, sentient dimension. Following the semiotic terminology proposed by Peirce, human encounters do not rely exclusively on symbols, but suppose the permanent participation of icons and indexes. Peirce explicitly correlates the character of signs to feelings and (bodily) dispositions. Susanne K. Langer proposed a finer description for these deeper layers of human meaning by introducing the distinction between *representation* and *presentation*. We can now add that the presentational is *expressive*: in this semiotic sphere, we already know what the world is like by feeling into it. Our spontaneous encounter with the world is *expressive* from the start in the sense that we perceive it directly as affectively colored. Langer (1942) acknowledges this expressive sphere of meaning as preceding symbolic meaning. Moreover, the expressive sphere shows its anchoring role for understanding in its absence; causing a feeling of estrangement and alienation observed in certain types of aphasia (Goldstein, 1948). Signs are *felt* just as much as they are thought.

While the expressive sphere unveils a phenomenological dimension in social interaction (Cornejo, 2008), the skeptic’s question might arise: If both speaker and the addressee are able to *experience* and *feel* their own perceived world, what are the reasons to propose a *common experience* at the origin of signs? The background of this question assumes that people are condemned to perpetual isolation, since no true understanding is possible. This image of personhood has its roots in Hobbes’ formulation “man is an arrant wolf” as a cornerstone for modern anthropology, extended in Rousseau’s vision for the social contract as a solution to people’s hopeless, vicious condition. I grant that there are situations wherein distrust might be the most natural and adaptive attitude. Contemporary society offers manifold instances where Hobbes’ might be the best description of interaction. But our delimitation of the minimal social encounter excludes such kinds of “strategic” (Habermas, 1984) social encounters. Not every social exchange can be qualified without further ado as a minimal social encounter. The fact that two people exchange speech is not a necessary nor sufficient condition for them to genuinely share experiences. A formal conversation between a boss and her subordinate often fails to fall under what a minimal social encounter is, just as a chat between Robinson Crusoe and Friday – at least back when they were not friends.

Werner and Kaplan (1963) proposed the mother-child-object relationship as a paradigm for genuine social encounters. They called it the “primordial ‘sharing’ situation” (Werner and Kaplan, 1963, p. 42). No other human interaction is less distorted by distancing attitudes promoted by acquired social roles. Mother-child relationships clearly evidence human tendencies to share experience so, when a bird rapidly flies in front of them, or a sudden noise is heard in the background, they both dwell in expression and co-feeling occurs. In this proto-symbolic sphere, mother

and child's utterances condense a unitary meaning, configuring the first words. Unsurprisingly, children's first words are often holophrastic: they do not refer to a specific object, but rather global situations where those words have been previously used (Shanon, 1993).

Our overall thesis is that episodes of true shared experience happen all the time and are not restricted to mother-children relationships. Of course, they are more likely to take place where these affiliative links are strong (i.e., friendship, family). Adult relationships are complex and defy the possibility of fitting into a particular type while being described as a whole. During the course of a typical conversation between adults, mutual attitudes can oscillate and move. Sometimes the *I* flows with the *You* – I simply follow your thoughts; while sometimes, even during the same conversation I wonder if she did the right thing, or she might look tired to me, or I feel I need to put an end to our conversation because I am late for that thing. Nothing similar to this appears in the “primordial sharing situation” described by Werner and Kaplan (1963). But our point still remains valid: episodes of genuine co-phenomenology do occur in most (though perhaps not all) social interaction.

## 6 Conclusions

Cultural psychology's central aim is to account for the development of psychism and its relation to sociocultural processes. Such aim can only be attained by acknowledging that people do not partake in reality as an ensemble of detached atoms and events or senseless stimuli and conducts. A fully formulated psychological theory should start from the tenet that our psychic life unfolds in a meaningful reality from the start: we perceive trees, people, music, and so on. However, its meaningfulness is not a personal creation, but a social instance. In fact, it makes me part of a community that acts accordingly: we water trees, talk to people, and make music. Herein one of the great paradoxes that cultural psychology must confront: How can such an intimate, personal process as meaning-making be social? This is none other than the “micro-macro problem” in psychology (Vorderer & Valsiner, 1999): Is society forming a sense of self, or are people configuring social meaning?

A way to grasp meaning as involved in these questions is through the concept of *sign*: human reality is not comprehended by mere representation, but critically involves presentational layers. However, not any use of sign can satisfactorily solve the micro-macro problem. Throughout this chapter, I have presented two historically informed approaches to understand the sign, Saussurean semiology and Peircean semiotics, each one presenting a different answer to the aforementioned problem. While semiology perpetuates a schism between person and society, semiotics offers a potentially crucial concept of sign. In order for semiotics to play this role, it must go back to its roots and include all kinds of signs. The tendency to reduce semiotics to symbolism can inadvertently lead into accepting semiology's tenets, which are manifest in poststructuralist approaches.

Why is it that a symbolic theory cannot address the micro-macro gap? The answer is as concise as it is profound: because the *symbol* is typically understood as a non-developmental unit. This is also what motivates an interest to study the *origin* of signs.

We owe the possibility to adequately address the micro-macro problem to three of Jaan Valsiner's key insights. Firstly, the systematic introduction of C.S. Peirce's semiotic theory in developmental psychology allows to overcome the limitations of L. S. Vygotsky's tacitly semiological approach. In this sense, the historical relevance of Valsiner's thought to psychology is tantamount to Habermas' to sociology. Secondly, using Peirce's semiotics, Valsiner is able to revitalize the notion of development advanced by the *Naturphilosophie*. He is the most notable representative of the idea of the impermanence of being in psychology. Perhaps paradoxically, this idea reveals how profoundly a-developmental current developmental psychology is. And thirdly, by means of this notion of development, Valsiner redeems a forgotten psychological endeavor: studying the temporality of human consciousness. The impermanence of all beings is manifested in Valsiner's "irreversibility of time," bridging his thought to James, Baldwin, and Bergson's.

Following Valsiner's ideas, we need a truly developmental approach to signs. When we address the question concerning the origin of signs, we find a stance where words are filled with communal meaning. Such stance is not an abstraction, but the tangible place where social interaction occurs: the minimal social encounter. This place shows speakers sharing their experience concerning the world to an addressee. Meaning configured in interaction is not purely symbolic but becomes symbolic language in vitality. Representational symbolism finds its roots in proto-symbolic semiotics, following Peirce's original inclusion of feelings and dispositions as part of the semiotic flux. In this sense, an experiential aspect emphatically underscored by Peirce has been postponed until now. Only when we acknowledge that social symbolic life cannot be fully rendered if it is separated from the vitality of human experience, we will reach an integration of what now stands separated as sociocultural and psychical processes.

The recognition of these deeper spheres of semiotic life is essential to deploy an actual cultural *psychology*. *Ganzheitspsychologie* – which Valsiner (2005) has importantly contributed to reassess – has taught us that the proto-symbolic are not simply nuances to a symbol that still reigns over meaning; it is rather them that infuse sense and vitality to symbolic language. Differently put, it is the primordial substance of all semiosis. To the extent we acknowledge the affective quality of the world we dwell in, we can also acknowledge the different valuations that populate it (Rojas, 2021). It is not surprising that the later efforts of Jaan Valsiner aim precisely at pondering the importance of the aesthetic dimension of our meaningful reality (Valsiner, 2019, 2020). Thus, the rediscovery of affectivity and vitality makes cultural psychology closer to aesthetics. Let us see what the next steps toward a new synthesis might bring along.

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# Expansive and Restrictive Semiosis: Exploring the Process of Cultural Guidance



Alex Gillespie

## 1 Introduction

“Human living is focused on future-oriented temporal extension. This extension comes through setting up specific signs of sufficient abstractness that begin to function as guiders of the range of possible constructions of the future.” (Valsiner, 2007, p. 58)

Humans are motivated by a not-yet-here future. Rooted in the present, possible paths of action branch out in a myriad of directions; some appealing and others feared; some clear and others vague. Despite the objectively compelling and practically consequential nature of these possible futures, they are entirely semiotic constructions.

These possible futures, as semiotic constructions, are simultaneously enabled and constrained by culture. Without signs and ready-made ideas of what is possible, our imagination of possible futures would be impoverished. But, equally, the sign systems employed are never neutral, and they can only ever make salient a subset of the infinite number of possible futures. These sign systems are saturated in values, shaped by their social history, that foreground what is desirable, feared, and socially acceptable.

In this chapter, I will examine the semiotic processes that can either expand or constrain, loosen or contract, human imagination of possible futures. I begin with a brief review of semiosis, identifying key insights from Peirce, Vygotsky, and Valsiner. Then I compare constrained semiosis in intergroup conflict with expansive semiosis in artistic expression. By comparing semiosis in these two different

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domains, I identify the underlying semiotic processes that expand and restrict semiosis.

## 2 Semiosis: Expanding and Restricting the Field of Thought

Semiosis, the dynamic transformation of signs in relation to other signs and experiences, is the bedrock of human phenomenological experience (Valsiner, 1998). The stream of feelings, images, and words, that we sometimes follow (e.g., day dreaming) and sometimes try to lead (e.g., directed thought), is the essence of our psychological being (Valsiner, 2001). Understanding how semiosis expands and restricts meaning is a fundamental task of psychology. In this task, Jaan Valsiner has been a beacon, continually shining a light both backward, finding rich resources in historical texts, and forward, pioneering genuinely novel insights.

The intellectual roots of semiosis, Valsiner (2007) has reminded us, are in the work Peirce who emphasized that all thinking, whether mundane or scientific, is sign based. “A sign,” Peirce (1955, p. 99) writes, “is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.” There are three key elements. First there is the sign itself (Peirce, 1894), which can be either an icon (based on similarity such as a drawing), an index (based on causality such as a weathercock), or a symbol (an arbitrary association such as a word). Second, there is what is symbolized, the object, or more accurately an aspect of an object, that is picked out by the sign. Third, there is what Peirce called the “interpretant” which is the system of signs, within somebody’s mind, that makes sense of the sign. It is the interpretant that gives the meaning of a sign significance. One of Peirce’s key insights is that the interpretation of a sign can become an object, an aspect of which is picked out by a new sign, and which appeals to a new interpretant (e.g., when the “I” at time 1 becomes the “me” at time 2). This semiotic escalation, in which parts of the sign for the basis for subsequent semiosis, makes semiosis a fundamentally dynamic process.

Another key historical landmark in understanding semiosis, that Valsiner (Valsiner, 2015; Valsiner & Van de Veer, 2000) has illuminated, is in the work of Vygotsky (Van Der Veer & Valsiner, 1994) who conceptualized signs as peculiar tools. While we use physical things to act on the world (e.g., hammers, shovels), we use signs (e.g., drawings, weathercocks, and text) to act on minds, to create feelings, change perceptions, or impart ideas (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010). Moreover, signs can be used not only to act on the minds of others but also to act on our own minds. Crucial here is the reverse action of signs, that is, their ability to create impressions in the mind of self as well as other (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). This is very similar to what Mead (1922) meant by the term significant symbol, which has comparable effects on the mind of self and other (Gillespie, 2005). This reversibility is what enables signs initially directed at others to become directed at self and thus forms the basis for self-regulation and goal-directed thought.

Shining a light forward, Valsiner (Valsiner, 2007, 2009) has conceptualized semiosis as dynamic, hybrid, and field-like. Semiosis is a dynamic process of channeling because signs beget signs in a continual process of semiosis; where guidance comes from the signs themselves, with webs of prior meanings (both cultural and individual) shaping what is possible in the next round of semiosis while still leaving enough room for uncertainty and creativity. Signs are hybrid because icons, indexes, and symbols are combined; and meanings are often overlaid, with older signs being repurposed, and tensions set up between contradictory signs. In this hybridity, signs don't determine meanings as much as create fields of possible meanings or semiotic spaces of association and thought. In contrast to many metaphors in psychology that try to specify points (ratings, attitudes, propositional meaning), Valsiner has a volumetric approach, emphasizing fields, or multidimensional volumes, of meaning that constrain thought by circumscribing a boundary but also enable a play of meanings within the boundary. In this sense, Valsiner conceptualizes semiosis as constrained possibility.

To conceptualize semiosis as dynamic constrained possibility, Valsiner has introduced a series of key concepts: meta-signs that regulate, guiding and constraining, lower level signs (Valsiner, 2007); promoter signs that guide the variability in future meaning construction (Valsiner, 2002, 2005); redundant control, in which multiple overlapping constraints are used to guide semiosis (Valsiner, 2007); and circumvention strategies, used in overcoming/bypassing blocking signs (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998). Together these concepts conceptualize the dynamic creation and constraint of fields of meaning. They do not determine future meanings as a precisely defined point; rather, they circumscribe, or foreground, a broad or narrow field of possible meanings. This conceptualization of semiosis as constrained indeterminacy simultaneously raises questions about constraint while also leaving space for creativity. Thus, it shines a light on the semiotic processes, or cultural guidance system, that expand or constrain the fields of possible meanings.

### 3 Expansive Semiosis in Literature

Expansive semiosis is particularly evident in art. Literature, film, and visual art can absorb the audience, creating a structured, but open, space for imagination (Benson, 1993). Although semiosis is never neutral or unconstrained, art often pushes in the direction of openness, affording or even promoting proliferating interpretations. Such an opening of meaning is evident in Samuel Beckett's (1996) short story "Company."

The text begins: "A voice comes to one in the dark." This sentence affords multiple interpretations. The use of "one" invites reversibility between "I," "you," "she," and "he." The abstractness of "a voice," without being attributed to a source, invites the reader to envision multiple possible sources. The phenomenological experience of reading the opening sentence is of coexisting, and possibly incompatible, meanings. This expansive and ambiguous style continues throughout the text. The

positions of the voice, the subsequent thoughts about the voice, and the narrator are never clearly defined; they are held in a state of superposition, with possible meanings shimmering in and out of focus.

The text not only leaves key terms ambiguous, but, it defines them in contradictory ways. Who is in the dark hearing the voice? Sometimes it is “he” but at other times it is “you.” Is the voice talking to the reader, the “he” or a third? The reader is both in the story, invited to be in the dark, and being told about someone else who is in the dark hearing a voice. And, who does the voice belong to? Sometimes it is suggested that there is someone else in the dark who is speaking, yet, at other times, it seems that the voice and the thoughts about the voice are one in the same. So maybe the voice is not external to the stream of thought; maybe the whole text is a single multivoiced stream of thought? – which of course, at a textual level, it is. Unanchored, without a body or clear perceptions, the stream of thought is afloat in the dark, wandering the entire web of possible meanings.

As the text continues, there are few closures and many openings. The only certainty is the stream of text itself, the words about the voice, commenting on the voice. Everything else is fluid. Even the stream of thought itself seems simultaneously to belong to everyone and no one, and the voice seems to be simultaneously outside the stream of thought and a constitutive part of it. Sometimes certainty is offered, such as the oft repeated phrase “you are on your back in the dark.” But, no sooner is it offered, then the certainty is withdrawn, with a phrase such as “or of course vice versa.”

Using the terminology of Eco (1989), we can conceptualize “Company” as an open work. According to Eco, a text is not a mere string of words that sequentially determines meaning. Instead writing, and especially aesthetic writing, creates fields, or rather multidimensional volumes, of meaning. There is an aesthetic in expanding, rather than closing, these spaces of meaning, exploring and expanding the gap between the sign and what it signifies (Glăveanu & Gillespie, 2015). There is an aesthetic in the overdetermination of meaning, something which can’t be done in the material world. Meanings can be held in superposition, with contradictions not only tolerated, but multiplied and provoked. Such texts yield different meanings on each reading; like a projective Rorschach test, the meanings answer to the reader. Eco (1989, p. 3) writes: “the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood.”

In the terminology of Valsiner (2007, p. 80), Beckett’s (1996) short story exemplifies a “unity of opposites.” It vividly illustrates that the logic of meaning is separate from the logic of the material world (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015). At a material level, “I” cannot be “you,” and “they” are different to “us.” But, within the logic of meaning, as Beckett illustrates, “I” and “you” can coexist, and “we” can simultaneously be “they.” This is possible because of the reversibility of the sign (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). Within the phenomenology of meaning “I” is “you” because when you say “you,” I hear “I” – this reversal of the meaning of pronouns happens in conversation so rapidly we rarely notice (Gillespie, 2010). It is this reversibility that makes possible the shimmering of meaning between seemingly irreconcilable

opposites, creating a space of play that opens the text and the reader to novel and sometimes surprising meanings.

## 4 Restrictive Semiosis in Intergroup Conflict

Constrained semiosis is perhaps most evident in contexts of intergroup conflict. In such conflicts each side cannot completely ignore the other side; indeed, for the conflict to be experienced as such, each side must have some phenomenological awareness of the other side as having a different point of view. But, this awareness of the other point of view is dangerous because it might become convincing. Accordingly, in contexts of intergroup conflict, each side must cultivate ways of talking and thinking about the other, and their point of view, without being influenced by it. While much attention has been given to intergroup contact, much less attention has been given to semantic contact – that is how the ideas of the two groups connect (Gillespie, 2020). Semantic contact, in the context of intergroup conflict, reveals the powerful canalizing forces of culture, constraining what can be thought.

Consider the following two excerpts from an interview study of the intergroup conflict between Israelis and Palestinians (Nicholson, 2016). The first excerpt is from a Palestinian and the second is from an Israeli. These excerpts illustrate semantic contact because each speaker is talking about the views of the other group and provide insight into how semiosis can constrain fields of meaning. The first excerpt is from a young Palestinian man.

So most people, all Arab people, they understand the Holocaust. They understand the consequences of that, right? The thing is, no-one will understand the Nakba: They say it's just because you want to revolt against the Israelis. But they do not understand [...] They have Independence Day. (Male Palestinian, Gaza)

The semantic contact occurring in this excerpt is between the phrase “they say it’s just because you want to revolt against the Israelis” (which is the perspective being attributed to the outgroup) and the surrounding content (which is the perspective of the speaker). The outgroup perspective is embedded, as a meta-perspective (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010), within the speaker’s own perspective. Talking about the outgroup perspective is dangerous because it risks the outgroups’ motives appearing reasonable. Accordingly, this animated, or ventriloquized, perspective of the outgroup needs to be constrained. The semiotics constraining the voice reveal what Valsiner (2007) has termed redundant control, where multiple strategies are used, to overdetermine the constrained meaning.

First, the positions of “Arab people” and non-Arabs (the word “they” is used five times) are fixed and animated in oppositional terms; there is no ambiguity about who thinks what, and there is no possibility for the pronouns to reverse. The fixedness of these positions is aided by invoking concrete atrocities that are particular to each group. Second, the meta-perspective of the outgroup has questionable

legitimacy; it is framed in subjective terms (“they say”). Third, the single argument from the outgroup (“you want to revolt”) is resisted with multiple counter arguments, or meta-signs: (1) the ingroup understands the Holocaust, but there is no reciprocal understanding of the Nakba; (2) the outgroup has an Independence day, but the ingroup does not. The implied third counter argument is that the ingroup only want what the outgroup already have.

The second excerpt, again from Nicholson (2016), comes from a middle-aged Jewish Israeli man. This excerpt again contains an instance of semantic contact, where the perspectives of the outgroup and the ingroup collide, providing us with an opportunity to see how meanings are stabilized:

They (Palestinians) claim the land because they were the generation who was born on the land. You know, nobody actually promised them on their Bible. The Koran doesn't say anything about Israel [...] We were there 2000 years before them. (Jewish Israeli, male)

The semantic contact occurs between the first sentence (“claim the land because they were the generation who was born on the land”) and the rest of the excerpt that resists that perspective. Again, there are meta-signs with redundant channeling that constrains the semiotic potentials.

First, there is again a fixation of the views of the ingroup and outgroup (“they,” “they,” “them,” “we,” “them”), supported with reference to specific and sacred objects that are particular to each group. Second, there is the delegitimization of the perspective attributed to the outgroup (“claim”). Third, the single argument from the outgroup (“born on the land”) is resisted with multiple counter arguments, or meta-signs: (1) the land was promised to the ingroup but not the outgroup; (2) although the outgroup was born on the land, the ingroup were born on the land 2000 years before them. Again, there is a third counter-argument that aims to reverse the argument of the outgroup: if the argument about being on the land first is valid, then, one needs to recognize who was on the land two thousand years ago.

Across both excerpts one can see, not only that the ingroup talks about the outgroup, but, also that they also use semantic barriers to prevent the perspective of the outgroup spurring untoward semiotic associations that might create empathy for their cause (Gillespie, 2008). As is expected, on the basis of identity research (Avraamidou & Psaltis, 2019; Psaltis, 2016), central to this restrictive semiosis is the rigid positioning of self and other that is repeatedly asserted. The opposites of self and other mutually require each other, but are rigidly separated (Valsiner, 2007). But, this separation is not as ironclad as it might seem at first sight. In both excerpts we observed that each speaker selectively reverses meanings, creating an equivalence between self and other when it aids their cause.

## 5 The Semiotic Processes of Overdetermined Guidance

Comparing the semiotic processes in the two very different contexts, of expansive and restrictive semiosis, reveals similarities and differences. In both contexts, we can see the role of pronouns and specific events to anchor, or unanchor, the coordinates of meaning. In both contexts we can see the reversibility inherent in semiosis, but this can either work strategically or without direction. And, in both cases, we can see how multiple semiotic processes combine to overdetermine very different outcomes.

In terms of pronouns, there is a contrast between destabilization and reification. In Beckett pronouns are deliberately destabilized, with the alternation between “one,” “you,” and “he,” while in the conflict, there is the repetition and reification of “they.” In the intergroup context, the fixedness of the pronouns is reinforced by mentioning specific atrocities and sacred objects that cannot be thought of except with reference to unique groups. Instead of the darkness, that throws all ostensible facts into doubt, there are precise references that have strong emotional power to sharpen the distinction between self and other. In contrast, in Beckett there are no fixed events or objects, it is not even clear if there is perception, and the subjective nature of the text means that any events or objects are nebulous; without these anchors the pronouns become free-floating and mobile. Beckett’s protagonist is a stream of thought suspended in the dark, unencumbered by specifics, without events or objects that differentiate self and other, does not lead the difference between self and other to collapse, but rather become multiply determined; there is a differentiation between “me,” “you,” and “he,” but, psychologically, we are invited to occupy all positions simultaneously.

In terms of reversibility, this varies significantly between the contexts. Reversibility entails an equivalence between self and other such that the signs applied to other can be applied to self (Mead, 1922; Vygotsky & Luria, 1994). Reversibility is central to Beckett (1996), as evident in his repetition of the phrase “or vice versa.” Reversibility in the intergroup context is massively constrained, but not altogether absent and is evident in both excerpts. The logic in the first excerpt is to make an equivalence between what “they” have and “we” want. The reversibility in the second excerpt is to take “their” argument about being born on the land and argue that “we” were on the land two thousand years ago. What is remarkable is that the reversibility of the sign does not create an equivalence between “I” and “they”; instead it is used to appropriate their argument and to reinforce the distinction between “I” and “they.” Each excerpt selectively takes from the perspective of the other, foregrounding a premise or assumption that can be reversed to bolster the argument of the ingroup. Thus, there is a highly strategic reversibility in the intergroup context, which is in sharp contrast to the free-floating reversibility in Beckett’s short story.

In terms of redundant control, both contexts employ multiple strategies to either expand or restrict the proliferation of meaning. Valsiner describes redundant control as a key aspect of cultural guidance, where, instead of relying upon one mechanism,

multiple mechanisms are employed to guide semiosis so that, if one mechanism fails, the cultural guidance remains intact. In the case of Beckett, the multiple strategies are deliberate, and crafted, so as to create an expansive space of association. In the case of the intergroup conflict, the redundant control is more intricate. On the one hand, self and other are kept separate; but, on the other hand, brief moments of reversibility are allowed. The risk is that the reversibility escalates (e.g., leading to thoughts about self and other being similar because both have suffered due to the conflict, concerns for loved ones, loyalties to their communities, and a shared humanity). Accordingly, multiple strategies are deployed to prevent this escalation of reversibility, and this explains why we simultaneously see the repetition of pronouns, subjectivizing the outgroup point of view, anchoring differences in specific events, and detailed argumentation.

## 6 Conclusion

Expansive thinking that creates possibilities is one of the defining features of humanity; but it should not be taken for granted (Glăveanu, 2020). The societies we inhabit, our educational systems, and the discourses we promote both create possibilities but also impossibilities (Valsiner, 2007). While many impossibilities are created by limitations in the material world, other impossibilities are semiotic creations, barriers created by our ways of thinking. Arguably, many of the big events of history are the reconfiguring of the semiotic boundary between what is possible and impossible. Indeed, this is often what is required for intergroup reconciliation (Psaltis, 2016). Accordingly, understanding how culture expands and restricts semiosis is a crucial task.

In this task, of understanding how culture guides us into an unknown and unpredictable future, Valsiner has been a pathbreaker. He has expanded, not constrained, our conceptualization of semiosis. In a world where researchers are both too quick to forget the past and too constrained to imagine innovative approaches to psychology, Valsiner has somehow managed to reconcile both a profound understanding of where ideas have come from with an expansive vision for the future of psychology.

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# Hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields: The Generative Power of a Construct



Angela Uchoa Branco

Valsiner's contributions to Cultural Psychology are plural and diverse, as they open up new venues for the advancement of a scientific understanding of human beings' psyche. His theoretical and methodological elaborations, continuously progressing along new rounds of insightful and reflexive thinking, have provided a productive and coherent framework for interpreting the complex and systemic nature of the mutually constitutive processes at play between the development of people and cultural contexts. Here I will address one of Valsiner's major contributions to make sense of such mutual constitution, namely, the central role of Affective-Semiotic Fields—especially those of hypergeneralized kind—for the active and dynamic co-construction of the individual's Dialogical Self. The role of hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields in guiding human perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and conducts cannot be overestimated and, therefore, deserves a closer analysis and further theoretical elaborations, thanks to the fruitfulness of the concept. It represents—from a Cultural Psychology perspective—a fresh conceptual light upon constructs such as values and prejudices and allows for the investigation of those ontogenetic processes involved in their emergence and development.

Since the last two decades of the twentieth century, new perspectives in Psychology as a scientific study of human beings have emerged under the broad denomination of Cultural Psychology. Vygotsky's and Bruner's seminal contributions to this new approach have, ever since, expanded in numerous interesting directions, among which the work of Jaan Valsiner and his productive cultural semiotic approach. From his very first book in 1987—*Culture and the Development of Children's Action*—alongside so many seminal others (Valsiner, 1989, 1998, 2007, 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2019a to mention just a few), Valsiner masterly elaborated on the complex and systemic ways through which human psyche emerges and

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develops as a mutual constitution between subjects and cultural contexts, continuously taking place in the irreversible time.

Valsiner's (2012, 2014) understanding of the centrality of *meaning making processes*—Bruner's major contribution (Bruner, 1993)—goes further and deeper as he examines in detail the dialogical construction, or reciprocal construction, of dynamic meanings occurring in communication processes that take place in social practices within historical-culturally structured contexts. His work, which theoretically borrowed from Peircean semiotic perspective (Peirce, 1997), definitely sheds a new light on the study of *semiotics* itself, as Valsiner underlines the key role played by affective processes in the social co-construction of meanings. This core idea, hence, advances a fruitful psychological approach to the topic of semiotics, especially encouraging the investigation of meaning-making processes vis-à-vis human development. His theoretical elaborations on how *cultural canalization* processes provide possible directions to human development, yet keeping an openness to alternative routes related to life's indeterministic processes, put forward a new basis for the construction of a scientific framework absolutely sensitive to processes of human development. By stressing the multiple, complex, and systemically organized nature of developmental processes and dimensions, Valsiner's perspective articulates such complex multiplicity in coherent and thoughtful ways to make sense of human beings' development (Valsiner, 2014, 2017b). From the author's dialogical standpoint, cultural canalization processes—translated into incentives and constraints present in powerful cultural messages—do not operate solo, since all individuals are *active* and *constructive*, in different ways, in relation to their own development. Through transformative *internalization* and *externalization* processes, subjects and cultures co-construct each other by the simultaneous action of *cultural canalization* and subject's *agency* (it is worth noticing, though, that such agency not necessarily means intentionality).

Together with Robert Cairns (Valsiner & Cairns, 1992), Valsiner introduced a new concept in Psychology that has been extremely successful to deal with the complex and apparently contradictory nature of popular constructs in our field. I refer to the concept of *inclusive separation*, according to which apparently opposite psychological constructs such as “individual” versus “collective,” “cooperative” versus “competitive,” and “good” versus “bad,” in fact, consist of aspects of broader whole phenomena. Human phenomena should, therefore, be conceptualized as open systems that encompass a range of specific phenomena that are interconnected, interdependent of each other, and located along a continuum between two contrasting poles. For instance, individual and collective beliefs cannot be opposed to each other, since culture and the subject are related and constitute each other, namely, culture exists in the individual, and the individual exists in culture. For the purpose of analysis, we can designate a society as more individualist or collectivist, due to the proportion of social practices oriented by individualism or collectivism prevalent in its context. However, each adjective cannot be used theoretically to designate two separate or opposing phenomena. Not only a broad scope of possible hybrid combinations between the two

contrasting positions can be observed in different societies, but also the dynamicity existing within the phenomenon conceived as a system gives rise to constant changes and innovative characteristics detected as the phenomenon unfolds along the irreversible time.

Valsiner explains that it is not possible to fully understand any aspect of human conduct or psychological phenomena if the whole system encompassing such apparently opposite, dialogical poles is not taken into consideration. The general background provided by this holistic view of human phenomena, therefore, opens up an all-embracing and comprehensive understanding of how *micro*, *meso*, and *macro* dimensions interlace with each other to bring about human development. Hence the need to incorporate in psychology investigative efforts to make sense of the interplay between all three—macro, meso, and micro—levels of analysis.

Recently, many researchers have focused their research interests on people's increasing tendency, at least in Western societies, to use anti-social and violent ways to deal with interpersonal conflicts (Galtung, 1990; Sue, 2010). The search for one or various specific causes of this phenomenon does not make sense, because all factors involved are situated at the different levels of a same systemic organization. We need to take into account the complex interconnected factors related to the broader culture, encompassing its major orienting goals (macro level); its structured and dynamic institutional characteristics, norms, and rules (meso level); and the various, diverse micro systems or specific contexts within which people live their daily experiences (micro level). As all elements, aspects and levels of the open system are interdependent and permanently affect each other, and as their hierarchical positions dynamically change as both people and society move and develop through time, the only way to make sense of the phenomena under investigation is to examine all the possible relevant factors located at the macro, meso, and micro levels of the system. In our research on the increasing tendency of anti-social patterns of social interactions, we first aim at identifying those historical, structural, and axiological aspects of the broader culture, their impact over the institutionalized organization of the societies themselves, and the plural, heterogeneous proximal processes through which cultural canalization takes place and promotes internalization and externalization of specific actions and interactions. In short, we need to target the analysis of globalization processes and capitalism in its recent complex versions, the study of social institutions, their structure and normative rules, as well as those practices and co-constructed values and prejudices that emerge from everyday social interactions among people.

Next, I will focus upon the theoretical construct proposed by Valsiner—*Affective-Semiotic Fields*—and why this productive psychological construct can generate a better understanding of complex developmental processes such as the ontogenesis of values and the development of the Dialogical Self.

## 1 Valsiner's Self-Regulatory Model and Hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields

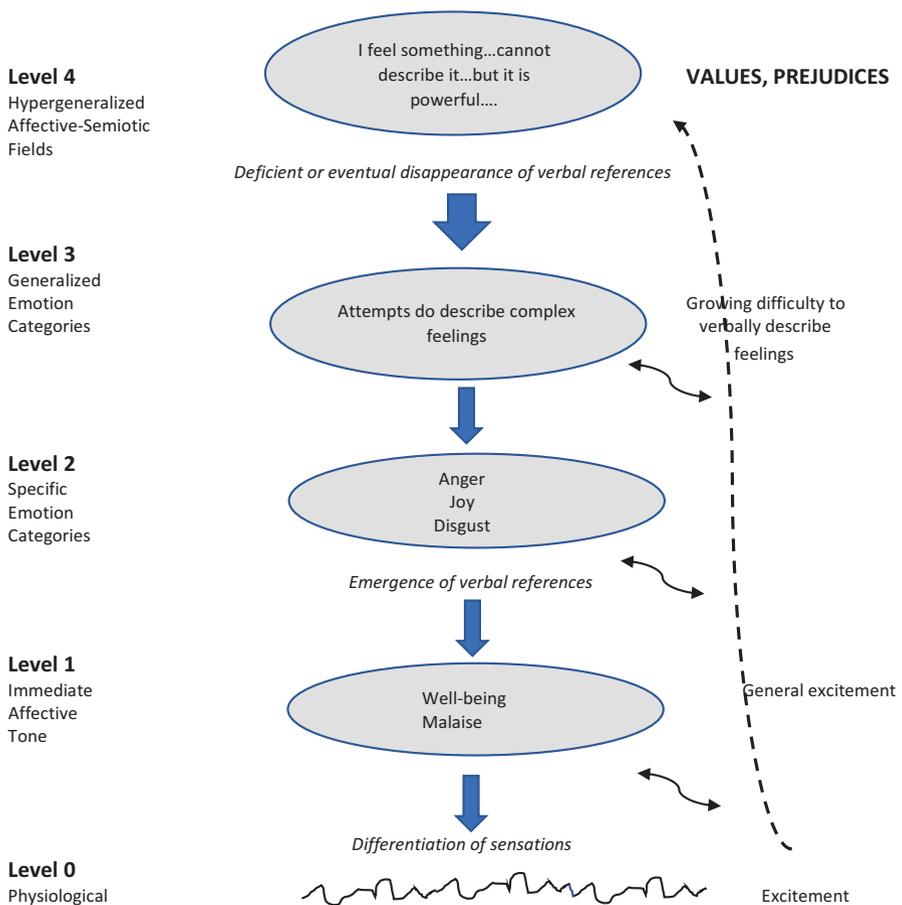
Among Valsiner's contributions for the advancement of psychological science, I wish to underline in this chapter one of his key generative ideas, which lie at the very basis of present empirical and theoretical efforts (Branco & Valsiner 2010; Branco et al., 2020; Roncancio-Moreno, 2015).

Valsiner has especially borrowed the concept of "field" in psychology from the work of Kurt Lewin (1965). However, he has expanded and elaborated the concept far beyond Lewin's theoretical perspective, for he frames the notion of field within an innovative approach to the issue of semiosis—he highlights the deep, affect-laden origins of semiosis and the central role of affective-semiosis in making sense of psychological phenomena (Valsiner 2001, 2014). Moreover, his own use of the construct—*field*—is absolutely conceptualized within a sociogenetic, dialogical cultural perspective that contextualizes it in distinctive ways. Fields are particularly compatible to a theoretical viewpoint that stresses the fluid, fuzzy, and dynamic flow of interdependent processes, occurring within the Dialogical Self System as it interacts with different aspects of developing cultural contexts. A field then represents a semi-structured psychological region that organizes the operation of complex processes, being defined by blurred, permeable, and somewhat undefinable boundaries that allow for both the maintenance *and* the transformation of themselves. As they do so, they promote the development of the whole Self system along the irreversible time.

Charles S. Peirce's semiotic theory also contributed significantly to Valsiner's innovative thinking in psychology (Valsiner, 2014). It assisted the author to establish relevant connections between culture, dialogical meaning construction, affective-cognitive processes, and Self development in order to propose a robust theoretical project for psychology as a science of human development. Building on Peirce's valuable and brilliant work, Valsiner has further elaborated and brought to the foreground the operation of affective-semiotic processes, their role in creating Affective-Semiotic Fields, and how both may contribute to the configuration of psychological phenomena. By focusing upon the affective dimension of human psyche, and its formidable impact over semiotic processes, the author offers alternative ways for the investigation of Affectivity, a dimension of human development that has been relegated to a secondary role in the study of the human mind. Even today, the role of affect, feelings, and emotions is downplayed as the human mind is conceptualized as an information-processing machine or reduced to physiological, chemical operations from a neuroscientific approach (Gazzaniga et al., 2018). The following section, though, moves otherwise and will particularly address the ontogenesis of hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields and its major role in psychology. From my own perspective, the use of the construct constitutes a significant theoretical step forward to make sense of human's perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and everyday actions.

### *Affective-Semiotic Self-Regulatory Model*

According to Valsiner’s *Affective-Semiotic Regulatory Model* (Valsiner, 2014), human psyche operates as an organized fluid yet dynamically structured open system, composed by hierarchical layers of signs. At the bottom of the system lie those physiological processes that result in affective outcomes leading the system toward basic approach-avoidance, pleasure-pain experiences. The layers above, impregnated by affective semiosis, act upon the layers below as a kind of regulatory system, hierarchically organized as their respective Affective-Semiotic Fields progressively become more and more generalized, more and more powerful concerning the regulation of the psyche. Figure 1, inspired by Valsiner’s Fig. 6.7—“Generalization of signs: how affect operates” (see Valsiner, 2014, p. 126)—provides a general picture of the such hierarchical systemic organization.



**Fig. 1** Affective-Semiotic Regulatory Model (after Valsiner, 2014)

According to the model, hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields are powerful enough to provide an all-encompassing filter, or frame for interpretation, concerning all individuals' interactions with themselves, others, and the world. Take, for example, someone deeply impregnated by a sense of religious devotion. Events, self-experiences, and social messages are perceived and interpreted according to her religious affective-semiotic framework, which serves to provide a hypergeneralized ground for her meaning-construction processes. When participating of communicative exchanges with a person holding different values and beliefs, she may have difficulties to listen to and understand the other's perspective, since her own values tend to constrain her capacity to even perceive or make sense of different yet possible meanings negotiated in the communication experience with others. The same happens to people with paranoid tendencies, rooted in hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields saturated with fear of being attacked by social others. Any word or gesture is immediately interpreted as a hostile movement, due to the overwhelming lenses generated by their hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields. In other words, such fields, better designated as *values* and *prejudices*, depending on the respective approach-avoidance valences, do exert a powerful regulatory role concerning human perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and actions (Branco, 2016).

### ***Hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields and the Investigation of Dialogical Self Development***

How do hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields develop along ontogenesis, and how do they relate to the development of the Dialogical Self? The Dialogical Self Theory proposed and further elaborated in the last three decades by Hubert Hermans and others (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Hermans et al., 2017) has served as a productive framework to make sense of the polyphonic and complex nature of the Self. It stresses the sociogenetic origin of the multiple, diverse I-Positionings that compose the Self, which can be conceived as an open system in permanent interactions with others throughout ontogeny. The Dialogical Self main characteristics consist of the occurrence of continuous dialogical interactions, simultaneously occurring at intra- and interpersonal levels, both contributing to its systemic configuration.

As the Dialogical Self develops in specific historical-cultural contexts in irreversible time, it establishes particular ties and relations with specific social others, which may generate the internalization of their voices, affects, and perspectives. However, internalization processes are constructive processes involving all dimensions of human psyche, and the notion that the significant others' voices are simply incorporated and reproduced by one's Self does not take into account the active role of individuals' agency. Moreover, from Valsiner's cultural semiotic perspective, the affective dimension of human interactions occupies a central role in internalization processes; therefore, instead of referring to "voices"—term directly associated with

verbal language—the active internalization of Affective-Semiotic Fields provides a much better picture of the processes involved.

From childhood to adolescence to adulthood, Affective-Semiotic Fields emerge, intensify, persist, transform, and fade away. As they emerge, they are hierarchically organized within the Dialogical Self System (Branco et al., 2020), and their hierarchical organization may change as time and contexts change alongside persons' life's trajectories. As they emerge, Affective-Semiotic Fields impregnate what we have denominated as *Dynamic Self Positionings (DSP)* (Branco et al., 2020), which correspond to what Hermans and colleagues designate as I-Positions (Hermans, 2001). With time and experience, certain Affective-Semiotic Fields become hypergeneralized and give rise to values and prejudices, which then guide the human psyche. Yet, hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields (values, prejudices) are dynamic, and even acknowledging that their relatively structured configuration is an important aspect of the Dialogical Self System—for it provides the system with a sense of oneness and continuity—these fields may reorganize themselves within the system, transform, intensify, or disappear along the person's developmental trajectory. In short, the way hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields emerge and operate in the irreversible time may help explain how psychological processes participate of the Dialogical Self development.

Data from a research carried out by our team in the Laboratory of Cultural Psychology, at the University of Brasilia, can illustrate the abovementioned point. We investigated, from a Trajectory Equifinality Approach (Sato et al., 2016), the development of the Dialogical Self of six obese women who, at some point of the study, were submitted to a bariatric surgery to lose weight. They were interviewed at three different moments—before, right after, and after months of the surgical procedure. As a result, we could follow some significant changes in their Dynamic Self Positionings, which indicated the quality and direction of their Dialogical Self development. Here I present the case of a woman who underwent a significant transformation due to this rupture (Zittoun, 2012)—the surgery—in her life's trajectory.

Regina (fictitious name) was 24 years old by the first interview. She was married, had a low-income work as a street-cleaner, weighed 179 kg, and had health problems due to her obesity. During the first interview, she explained she felt at ease with her weight because her father, then deceased, used to be a happy obese man, an extrovert person who loved to dance and did not care about other people's comments on his fat figure. She identified herself with him and did not care either, saying that she did not feel as a target of anyone's bullying. Her decision to undergo the bariatric surgery, according to her, resulted from realizing she could die, as her father did, due to health problems deriving from obesity. At this first interview, she said she was fine with her body, and the only reason to do the surgery was to take care of her health.

Regina's surgery, a few months later, was a success. By the third interview, she had lost an amazing total of 89 kg, and her narratives about herself significantly changed. In the interviews following the expressive weight loss, the picture changed completely. Progressively, in her narratives, she made explicit that, indeed, she suffered a lot with her relatives' bullying and was feeling more and

more proud about the way she saw herself in the mirror. A detailed analysis of her Dialogical Self development can be consulted in Branco and Oliveira (2019), where we explain how we inferred, from indicators extracted from her lengthy narratives, her Dynamic Self Positionings at each point and how this allowed us to organize a general hierarchical configuration of the Dialogical Self development of our participants during the period of the investigation. Here I will present the major change concerning Regina's trajectory during the year and a half that we investigated her self-reflections and appraisals about herself (Table 1). For the sake of space, only her dominant Dynamic Self Positioning among others, at each interview, is here included.

Regina's case provided interesting evidence of how, in a relatively short period of time during which a rupture (Zittoun, 2012) is experienced, the Dialogical Self can undergo a meaningful development. Her case, as well as other participants', additionally demonstrates the central role played by imagination of the future in people's self-development. Regina recurrently made explicit, especially at the third interview, that she would do everything she could to lose much more weight to become more beautiful in the future. Beauty, definitely, had become her most valued hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Field.

To conclude this chapter, it is worth mentioning that the role of imagined and anticipated futures has been another outstanding theoretical contribution of Jaan Valsiner to psychology, stressed in many of his publications (Valsiner, 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2019a, 2019b; Zittoun & Valsiner, 2016). His analysis of time and the conceptualization of the psychological dynamics between past, present, and future also consist of new, challenging venues for investigation of psychological phenomena. In short, Jaan Valsiner's work and legacy for theoretical psychology cannot be overestimated. The scope of his contribution in opening new venues concerning theory and methodology, though, goes far beyond the innovative perspectives he proposes to make sense the complex and dynamic nature of values' development. In this chapter, my purpose was to particularly underline that the investigation of human developmental trajectories and experiences, with the use of dynamic and complex constructs as the one here presented (hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields), can certainly lead to welcome advances in the co-construction of new theoretical elaborations concerning the systemic and processual understanding of the human beings.

**Table 1** The dominant Dynamic Self Positioning in Regina's Dialogical Self System at the three interviews

Prevalent Dynamic Self Positioning		
<i>1st Interview</i>	<i>2nd Interview</i>	<i>3rd Interview</i>
"I-as a daughter"	"I-as thin and healthy"	"I-as beautiful and very thin in the future"

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# Unfolding Semiotics: The Field of Mediated Activity



Marie-Cécile Bertau

## 1 Introduction

Starting off from cultural-historical theory, Valsiner's thinking circles around semiotic mediation and semiosis throughout many of his publications and also in formal as well as informal interventions. In saying this, I intend to draw attention to the movements Valsiner himself enacts as "off-from" and "circling around" and invite awareness for the form of his exploration via conceptual and aesthetically iconically represented movements of mediation as a transition and transformation, as an approximation of subjects to their reality that takes not so much the sign, but rather the *becoming* of the sign into account. This circling around semiosis does not nail the sign down to a static entity that is "in use" in certain contexts. Rather, it opens thinking and theorizing to the fleeting, yet distinguishable process of *semiosis*. There lies the clear commitment to a developmental psychology in Vygotsky's sense: a psychology that acknowledges development as principle of any psychological phenomenon with regard to its theorizing and that translates into methodological questions (cf. Valsiner, 2006; Shotter, 2000). There lies also a commitment to the "social mind" as visible in Valsiner's extensive epistemological-historical work on Vygotsky's thinking that plays a major role in allowing for inspiring conceptual projections and elaborations fueling contemporary psychology (e.g., Valsiner, 2001, 2015; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, 1994).

In my experience and understanding, Valsiner is thus presenting his theoretical basis as well as his take on semiotics through the lived and shared forms of his social-communicative and aesthetical-conceptual activities. Not the least, the type of movements Valsiner offers is purposefully open: on an interactional as well as on

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a conceptual level. The generosity of the person is refracted in the inviting framework he builds throughout his work: invitations to others and to different thoughts. My work profited from such invitations, and so it is now a pleasure to offer this piece of thinking to the outstanding scholar.

It is the core idea of movement that I follow in my exploration, taking up some of Valsiner's articulations of the semiotic dynamics as its dialogical counterparts. First, the temporal projection that is tied into to the human condition bound to irreversible time: a condition that is thus both lived, revealed, and transgressed by semiotic projections working as adaptation to possible future worlds and therewith pre-creating realities to human goal orientation: "forward-oriented semiosis – making signs, creating sign configurations, and setting up catalytic conditions for the future" (2016, p. 1). Therefrom, the human condition is a liminal one, caught up in the mediated immediacy and projecting, even catapulting itself through further mediational acts, which is the key activity of the psyche (Valsiner, 2007); however, psyche is not lost in un-groundedness through this process; rather, it constitutes and contains itself through the forms created by semiosis at different hierarchical levels allowing for autoregulation (Valsiner, 2007).

Humans relate to the immediate environment and do relate in a specifically human way, namely, mediated by signs, devices that serve to both *ingress* and *transgress* reality, thus regulating that relationship including a relationship to self: "These devices regulate their relations with their immediate environments by giving meaning to their extra-actions that change the environments, and intra-actions that change their own subjective worlds" (Valsiner, 2007, p. 120). This double-directedness of semiosis to human reality and self is a central motif to considerations of the sign across philosophy and psychology; since Vygotsky, it is a pervasive theme to cultural-historical theory and to cultural psychology understood as an integrative field (2016). The signs tie together environment and self, a tie needed to live as humans: embodied, unique, social, societal, and psychological beings. Valsiner is a main theorizer committed to this holism and investigating the sign he never loses sight of the necessity to understand this complex *being*. In this, semiotics becomes an indispensable element to psychology.

Finally, and in an echo of the double-sidedness of the sign and a recognition of holism, the role of and effects on objects in semiosis (Valsiner, 2009, 2016; De Luca Picione & Valsiner, 2017) as well as the position of the "semiotic subject" (Valsiner, 2009) are themes inherently belonging to understanding semiosis. These are the motifs that circumscribe the dialogical space I am addressing with the aim to follow the sign on its trajectories in order to attend to the very tracing of the device.

On this ground, I look into the idea of movement with the aim to understand how semiosis creates *contact* to reality and *transmutes* that very reality and – as a slight variation – how semiosis describes a movement that is *anchored* in actual and tangible reality and simultaneously *displaces* away from that reality. Through these different types and forms of movements, the "semiotizing" subjects are carried away, in a common, more or less synchronized move; they are caught in a whirlwind, captured by each other's signs, which they perform actively while simultaneously experiencing it receptively. They are displaced away from the here-and-now,

the me-here-you-there (we, they, etc.) and from the thisness-of-that-object: negating, transporting, reaffirming, and twisting-altering all these coordinates (already semiotic configurations). The same movement, however, grants and necessitates anchoring into a commonality that comes into existence as that specific one in the moment of semiosis. Finally, creating contact and anchoring, transmuting, and displacing build the scaffold that leads interiorization which adds yet more movements: reversion, transposition, and decoupling (Bertau & Karsten, 2018).

Describing and naming the movements which I consider to characterize semiosis, I have a particular type of semiosis in mind: the sign-becoming of *language signs*. That is, I do not pretend to explain semiosis at large because I assume that a language-based semiosis deploys distinctive dynamics and thus cannot be subsumed under the general term of semiosis as one element of a series of similars. The language sign displays specific movements and acts specifically onto reality, which I mean to include Other, Self, and the world of objects (natural and artifactual, with boundaries not always distinct).

My aim is thus to understand how language-based semiosis occurs though the different types of movements it induces. I will conjoin three different thinkers all grounded in a pragmatic understanding of language, i.e., considering language-as-activity. Vygotsky and Vološinov can be linked to the Humboldtian tradition viewing language as activity: *energeia*, as Humboldt calls it, predicates its nature; language is an activity (*energeia*), not a product (*ergon*) (von Humboldt, 1999). Bühler's approach to language is firmly grounded in the mutual navigation of a "system of two," members of a community, he therewith rejects a solipsistic approach to semantics (1927, p. 60).

Vygotsky addresses the language sign in thinking, while Vološinov addresses it in communication; the language theorist and psychologist Bühler, in turn, is interested in how language is able to (re)present almost everything we can think about in its own peculiar way (*Darstellung*, see Bühler, 1927).<sup>1</sup> Bühler's questioning is committed to language, holding it clear from two sides – philosophy and psychology – thus keeping it consequently on a ridge so as not lose the phenomenon to either side (2011, p. xcii). These three takes are linked to each other by the key notion of *contact* and the distinct inclusion of *Other*, that is, the recognition of otherness as inherent to the language sign.<sup>2</sup> Both contact and otherness inform the movements specific to the language sign viewed from the respective angle of the three thinkers.

In the following second section, I first address how Bühler, Vološinov, and Vygotsky, respectively, theorize the language sign's specific dynamics. In the third

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<sup>1</sup>The German term Bühler uses for "representation" is *Darstellung*, although the Latin derived "Repräsentation" is also available in German. *Darstellung* induces a difference to *representation*: "dar-" in German has the meaning of "there" with a motion toward or at something, somebody. Hence, it is close to describing, constructing, and producing, for instance, a picture or a theater performance. The shift to "presentation" leaving "representation" marks this difference (Friedrich, 2009; Bertau, 2016).

<sup>2</sup>"Other" with a capital is meant to represent a specific other, several specific others, as well as a public and generic instance.

section, I explore the idea of the field of mediated activity as introduced briefly in Bertau (2021a). I propose this notion in order to gain a more complete understanding of the unfolding semiosis at work in actual language activities of subjects generating a “language spacetime” (Bertau & Karsten, 2018; Bertau, 2011a; b): it unfolds within and toward, possibly against, a concrete physical-symbolic field.

## 2 Language Generated Movements

### *Bühler and Displacements*

Bühler’s aim is to keep language from being too strongly abstracted and thereby detaching it from the speech event “including the circumstances in life in which it more or less regularly occurs” (2011, p. 31) while simultaneously not engaging in its analysis as reality of speaking only. Bühler chooses the life and circumstances related to a speech event belonging to the “system of two” (*Zweiersystem*, Bühler, 1927, p. 60), sign sender and sign receiver in a common perceptual situation, as the basic reference for his considerations. Language representation is to be theorized starting from that basis and not losing sight of it. Language is and remains bound to this situation of the two individuals; it is nothing *less*. Within this situation, individuals *navigate* each other’s conduct and experience toward a coordinated understanding and *regulate* each other through different types of contacts, which is the reason for understanding language as practical “field implement” (Bühler, 1927, 2011) Fig. 1.

The pragmatic triad and the notion of field-implement highlight Bühler’s anti-Cartesianism. Language signs are not used to reflect the world but to mediate it. The mediating of language is jointly achieved *and* in need of a commonly lived and experienced field. Mind-centered “representation” is thus rejected, that is, the power of mind to represent, that subordinates language to its activity. Rather, representation is relocated in the system of two and their situation – in language *here*, in the language practices of socially organized individuals. Thus, language represents through *presenting*, with a direct connection to reality that does not duplicate it (i.e., into the mind-represented one and the actual one).<sup>3</sup>

In my reading of Bühler, the idea of *Darstellung* as presentation most clearly shifts not only away from the power of the mind but also from the *sole individual mind* to interindividual and transindividual practices of articulating the world, other, and self. Presentation is but one element of the triad; it necessarily includes appeal to the hearer and expression of the speaker, as the organon model shows.

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<sup>3</sup>It is Friedrich (2009) who eloquently puts forth the argument of presentation against representation and representationalism in Bühler’s work. Bühler’s (2011) critique of Cassirer’s language philosophy is one of the supportive pillars to this interpretation (see Bertau, 2016), which is also in consonance with his decision to keep language on what I called the ridge, especially preserving it from “the danger of *epistemologism*” (2011, xcii).

## 2. ORGANON MODEL OF LANGUAGE (A)

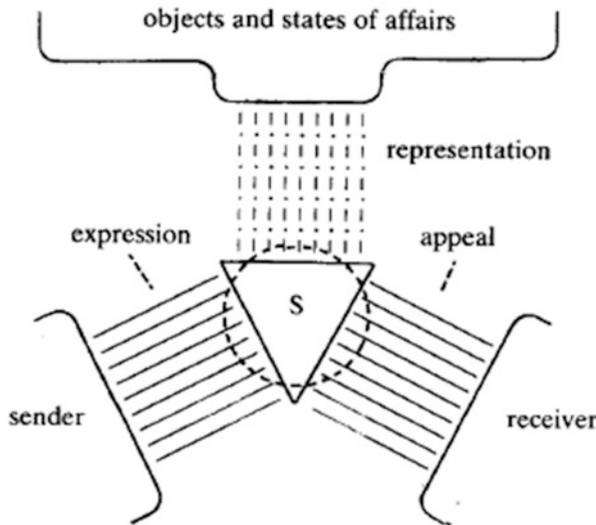


Fig. 1 The organon model, Bühler, 2011, p. 35

The appeal to the sender is a socialized and public one because it occurs through a public, conventional, transindividual means that takes on the actual subjectivity of the semiotizing subjects and forms it into a commonality and conventionality beyond their single subjectivities. The expression is related to the sender’s “inner states,” yet cannot be sheer expression of intimate subjectivity since mediated and thus formed in the public sign. Mediation by the language sign is the upfolding of that triad in life and its circumstances; it generates a specific contact between persons and reality that leads through societal otherness. The contact occurs in a displacing movement; its effect is to displace each other’s momentary attention toward an aspect of reality that is then jointly referred to – reference can be seen as a sustained movement. The movement has to be followed and accomplished by both partners; it requires them to reorient themselves actively in cognitive and affective terms (Bertau, 2014a). It is conditioned by the willingness-capacity to follow each other, i.e., by an affective openness to the other’s “symbolic touch,” and by the ability to move, i.e., to change one’s perspective, to look at the world from a different stance. This is accomplished within a common field of perception, of experience, of meaning.

Starting in the “deictic field” where the meaning of the language sign is fulfilled by its actual fieldedness (“this cup” needs the deictic field to be specified, i.e., meaningful), Bühler shows how language departs from this actual field and creates its own “symbolic field,” now generating a field that works on meaning by itself, creating its own (sensorial, structural, and contextual) auxiliaries in order to direct

attention, to form expression and appeal.<sup>4</sup> Indication is now replaced by presentation, and meanings are no longer context or field-dependent, so the partners *can and must* construct notions which are no longer bound to extra-linguistic reality but are generated by language itself. The language sign in the symbolic field constructs its own context (or field). Language presentation occurs, *making present what is not conceivable otherwise*, i.e., unconceivable without language presentation (Friedrich, 2009) – this is the very accomplishment of language.<sup>5</sup> It is also the distinctive moment where language cannot be subordinated to the representational power of mind. The signs of language present a meaningful reality in its own rights – meaningful to social, mutually related individuals. Their mutual navigation and regulation go beyond an instruction to behave in a certain way, as the signal does: the symbol “directs and guides the intentional stance or the attention” (Sinha, 2007, p. 1282). It happens by the displacing movement which is a form of contact – coming into a language-mediated contact to each other and reality.

### *Vološinov and Form-Meaning*

Vološinov is one of the main protagonists in Soviet dialogism developing in the 1920s–1930s, i.e., in the same decades as Bühler’s work.<sup>6</sup> Humboldt’s language philosophy, intensely received in Russia and the Soviet Union at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century, forms the fundamentals of dialogism as epistemological framework in East European conceptions of language (Bertau, 2014b).<sup>7</sup> In this epistemological context, Jakubinskij’s pragmatic-dialogic linguistics fueled works of the Bakhtin-Vološinov-Medvedev Circle (Bertau, 2014b).<sup>8</sup> The Circle extended this linguistic approach specifically to questions of thinking and

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<sup>4</sup>With the aim to “liberate” (*erlösen*) language from the perceptual field and demonstrate its autonomy, Bühler (2011) restricts displacement to the deictic field. However, Bühler shows some ambivalence toward this liberation (see p. 286) that in my opinion only strengthens and confirms his theorizing of language as always working *on* reality *and* beyond it. See Bertau (2014a, 2016b) for a detailed discussion. In my own theorizing, I extend displacement to the symbolic field (Bertau, 2014a).

<sup>5</sup>Syntax is crucial to a complex communication system, a genuine symbol system (“two-class system”) that surpasses the code system (“one-class system”); see Bühler, 2011, Part I, Chapter 5.

<sup>6</sup>Actually, Vološinov translated an article by Bühler about syntax (Sériot & Tylkowski-Ageeva, 2010) and can be assumed to have been familiar with his pragmatic thinking.

<sup>7</sup>This dialogism came back to Western Europe in the early 1970s, further migrating to the Americas, through the work of Bakhtin (mostly with exclusivity for this scholar and in ignorance of his own interactive and inter-conceptual context).

<sup>8</sup>See Jakubinskij (1979) for the first, partial, English translation of Jakubinskij’s essay from 1923 and Yakubinsky (2015) for the first complete one. The translator of the latter Michael Eskin is the only one in the literature across different languages to transliterate the scholar’s name this way. For this reason, I stay with “Jakubinskij” with exception of direct reference to the English translation.

consciousness; Vygotsky (1987), from a psychological side, extensively used Jakubinskij's essay in order to describe the features of inner speech.

In a critical gesture toward Saussure's langue as self-contained system of signs and in continuity with Humboldt's notion of language activity, the language sign is situated in human society and displays a tangible phenomenality that is an inherent part of its symbolicity. Thus, the language sign is a spoken word, an utterance, that is, it is positioned and positioning, since it comes from a person and is addressed to another while transgressing each single person's speaking and receiving through its "meaning volume"; the language sign acquires this "volume" through the manifold moments of speaking and being listened to across persons, contexts, time (history), and "ideological spheres" in society (Vološinov, 1986). The "chain of utterances" (Bakhtin, 1986), or the dialogical texture, thus formed is multitemporal, multivocal, and a dynamic process of form-meanings that can crystallize into genres as interim formations. The "wandering" of these form-meanings is one core idea of dialogism, and the notion of form is particularly important to conceive the specific contact to reality the language signs confer.

Committed to the pragmatic approach, Vološinov considers the verbal factor from the viewpoint of its relation to its extra-verbal context (Bertau, 2008). Verbal facts are neither to be indistinctively merged with the sociopsychological and situational facts nor abstracted to an outside system of language, nor is the extra-verbal situation considered as external cause acting as "mechanical force" on the utterance (Vološinov, 1983a, p. 12). Vološinov rather situates language as constituted by the interaction and realized in the utterance (1986, p. 95). As an actually spoken event, it displays a tangible form, and this means consequently that "the problem of the forms of an utterance *as a whole*" gains an "extreme importance" (1986, p. 96, emphasis in original).

Vološinov (1983a, b) examines the form of the utterance in detail beginning with a subtraction illuminating the role of the form for the content and meaning of the utterance: an utterance without words would nevertheless embody into the tone of voice or in a gesture as social evaluations according to social orientation itself determined by "the situation, in relation to the listener, the other participant in the situation" (1983b, p. 126). The contact to real-life happens herewith: "Indeed the content and the meaning of the utterance require a form to actualize or realize them, and without such form they would not exist at all. Even if the utterance turns out to have no words in it whatsoever, there should still be the *sound* of the voice (intonation), or at least a *gesture*. *If there is no material expression, there can be no utterance, just as there can be no experience*" (1983b, 126, emphasis in the original). Thus, the living materiality of verbal communication cannot be conceived as secondary envelope to a pre-existing meaning but comes to be the condition to any kind of expression and of consciousness itself: "*outside embodiment in some particular material* (the material of gesture, inner word, outcry), *consciousness is a fiction*" (1986, p. 90, emphasis in the original). The meaning of objectification relies in this form-becoming in a specific material which is at the same time the mark of its belongingness to a social-societal sphere of evaluations.

From this starting point, Vološinov (1983b) distinguishes three elements constituting and organizing the form of the utterance into an intelligible, i.e., socially understandable, one: intonation, word choice, and the arrangement of the words. Intonation is the primary element from which the two others depend, since it provides the contact and type of relation to the extra-verbal reality at stake, i.e., the situation and the audience. This contact is the transgressing moment where the verbal act passes the frontier: “Intonation establishes an intimate connection between discourse and the non-verbal context. Living intonation, as it were, leads discourse beyond its verbal limits” (1983a, p. 13). This perspective leads Vološinov to a notion of language form that reaches into the extra-verbal and receives the societal reality of utterances.

The three form elements serve the *production* of the relation to reality (Friedrich, 1993). Their effect lies in establishing the relationships between verbal content (meaning) and its context (communication situation and audience). Meaning is therewith determined evaluatively, i.e., made valid for this specific context through its form. Passing the limits, the verbal act also leaves the sphere of control of the speaker: the contact to reality is occurring onto the meaning and not represented in it. In this way, language forms keep their intrinsic form value because *they do not express the meaning content* but rather orient to it. This orientation is not displaying the meaning itself, but its relation to the extra-verbal.

The language form is thus not ending up in meaning but proves to have an autonomous content that is put into interaction with the meaning content. Speaking of interaction between form content and meaning content highlights the fact that the content of the form is not representing the meaning content. For this reason, Friedrich introduces the term “content of the form” (*Gehalt der Sprachform*, Friedrich, 1993, p. 163). The meaning that the language form produces lies beyond the verbal meaning and provides for that reason the contact to reality.

Thus, not absorbing meaning as a container, the effect of the language form works through *a difference* stressing the move to the transindividual and allowing for a communicable expression in the first place. It is the difference of psychic experience (psychic content) to the spoken utterance. This difference is connected to what Friedrich (1993) considers Vološinov’s discovery of the language sign’s specificity. While this sign is supplied by psychic experience and therewith generates a meaning, that language semiotized, formed meaning cannot be traced back to the psychic experience itself – a transindividual representation of the individual psychic experience happens.

### ***Vygotsky and Reversion***

An analog difference can be observed in Vygotsky (1987) who considers the language sign in thinking. Here the difference is located between thought and word, as “[t]hought is not expressed but completed in the word” (p. 250). A difference always

remains between the thought and the word as audible social event. As with Vološinov, this difference prevents subjective expression from being either absorbed or cut off from the social. Rather, there is a transformative and relating-distinguishing movement between thought and word. The difference thus allows for the passage from subjective experience to a socialized and socializing form, granting the semiotizing subject with transindividual understandability by its fellows – and therewith self-understanding. It is this passage that generates both distinction from and relation to the social in a mutual articulation. The difference opens to the transgressing movement, a sustained process that has to occur in order for the complex relating of social and individual to exist.

As the form can be considered in Vološinov (1983a, b) as the mediational element between the objectivity of the utterance and the content of the psychic experience, it is inner speech that is the mediational element between external speech and thinking in Vygotsky (1987) – *form* mediates in the first case and *meaning*, even “pure meaning,” in the latter case (Bertau, 2011b). Both triads prevent a direct translation between thought or psychic experience and word as event of social reality. A direct relation would either completely inflate or totally colonize the subject.<sup>9</sup> And both mediational elements provide the semiotizing subject with contact – to real-life and to the own self via the real other. Where for Vološinov (1983a, 1983b) the language form of the utterance produces a contact to real-life, the interiorized word of the real other produces a “social contact with oneself” in Vygotsky (1999, p. 279) – a social contact thus similarly real, and “irritating,” because it is pregnant with otherness, alienness.

Vygotsky started in 1925 (1999) with a clear commitment to the language sign being the other’s word or speech, as a specific “social irritant” – as he formulated in the jargon of the day.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding, speech as the other’s word is the starting point for a significant movement that transforms behavior, socializes, and leads to consciousness: “I, myself, can reproduce the same irritants and they become reversible for me early, and hence determine my behavior *in a different way* from all others. They make me comparable to another, and make my actions identical with one another” (1999, p. 277; emphasis in the original).

In developing his notion of language mediation beyond toolness from the 1930–1931 on, Vygotsky returns more explicitly to this effect induced by the “social irritant” as he elaborates a second version of interiorization that stresses the

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<sup>9</sup>The first model may be said to correspond to representationalism and its obsession with the total control of reality – reality of mind – and control through mind being the two sides of that coin. Both models – inflation or colonialism – further correspond to political models of the subject: a total agent versus a total object. I would argue that both forms are extremely harmful ways of colonization. I read Valsiner’s collaborative efforts to move to an integrative cultural psychology (Valsiner et al., 2016) as not the least a political endeavor to counter both forms of totalitarianism.

<sup>10</sup>Veresov (1999) notes that Vygotsky (1999) uses the term “irritant” and not “stimulus” (as translated in the English version of 1979) which he actually used in other texts. The reason for Vygotsky’s lexical choice remains unclear, but I find it highly inspiring to understand the effect of otherness or alienness for self via the language sign (see Bertau, 2021c).

significance of the social other and of the dialogicality of the process (Bertau, 2008; Bertau & Karsten, 2018). Further expanding on this turn occurring during the last 3 years of Vygotsky's life, together with Karsten, I proposed a closer look at this special (Bertau & Karsten, 2018). The other links concretely back to the social sphere with its symbolic and material-sensuous form-meaning activities understood with Vološinov and Bühler.

The proposition explains interiorization through three movements: reversion, transposition, and decoupling. Hence, interiorization amounts to a series of different but continuous and mutually related movements between self and other supported by specific formations in language activity and leading to other such formations (see the features of inner speech in contrast to social external speech, Vygotsky, 1987). The pivot is the other, and the transformational as well as transformed means is the language sign.

The process starts with a *reversion* of dialogical positions whereby these are fused although hold distinct as positions or stances to reality. Reversion of the language sign to self is a movement via the other and her/his otherness as other and Other: being a unique individual and at the same time the representative of a language community that speaks a particular language with all the norms and rules for the forms-meanings-in-functions this entails. *Language* is interiorized, not a private sound or expression, nor a figure invested with psychic energy (internalization). Hence, the "irritation" introduces difference and dialogue to the individual's psychological processes and creates polyphony drawn through by a particular other and by a public Other, by their voices.

*Transposition* amounts to the suspension of the actual other through the self's turning away, nevertheless continuing the language activity and hence keeping addressivity structures, voices, and positions, although now working differently. This difference is owed to the temporal and at least partial removal of constraints given by an actual other/Other. Once these constraints are suspended, the forms of the utterances can be adjusted to the needs of the subject, and meanings can be realized in new ways.

*Decoupling* deepens and completes the interiorization movement. This final decoupling from actual reality and actual others opens the subject to simulate and experience voices, positions of other(s), and self (selves) that might result in the imagination of new stances and meanings, new forms, and contacts. Exploring and practicing this decoupling is of key importance to human sociopsychological complexity (Bertau, 2013).

In this series of movements, the difference between thought and word, the reduction of the form moments of social language in favor of the opening to meaning, is at work (with Vygotsky, 1987). Similarly, the form moment as producing contact to an imagined reality is at work – imagined contacts experienced and lived through (with Vološinov, 1983a, 1983b). It can be argued that displacements of different kinds are performed and explored – it is language itself that is acquired in that very power.

Interiorizing language is then not simply an exercise to have inner speech in a special intimate, permissive space bare of actual others; it is the intellectualization

of speech and the verbalization of the intellect (Vygotsky, 1987) as continuously occurring movement, itself sustained by the flow between interiorization-exteriorization, passages that are formed, shaped out with regard to the differences and relations they induce and invoke, therewith altering social as well as individual language activity. Speaking is speaking as due *and* differently. It is “speech-thinking” (Bühler, 2011, *Sprechdenken*) as due and speech-thinking in a unique way, still within the realm of the understandable (mostly). Nothing but the regular life of living language signs.

### 3 The Field of Mediated Activity

I propose to now explore the notion of field. This exploration reaches into disciplinary neighborhoods and is certainly naïve and ignorant to many respects, but at this moment, the point is for me to open up to some considerations reaching beyond the confines of language psychology and semiotics. The field represents a further step to ground language in actual and concretely lived, embodied moments of the subjects: their doingness is symbolic and “fielded,” as I will explain. The overarching goal is to add a further element that counters a language notion that reduces it to an abstract, disembodied, a-historic, and socioculturally abstracted entity located upstream of actual speaking and listening in cognition. The counterpoint is the immanence and immediacy of language activity, simultaneously illuminating its mediated character – *language-mediated immediacy*.

The idea of the field can be linked to conceptions of a surrounding that is more integrated to living beings and particularly to humans than a sheer biological environment, a surrounding as topological formation within which and toward which living beings act and behave (Uexküll, Tolman, Lewin). As such, the field notion is inherent part of Valsiner’s reflections on human activity as grounded in everyday life contexts and of sign creation (2008, 2007). A “symbolic field” similar to the one I propose is briefly mentioned by De Luca Picione and Valsiner (2017).

To start with, Bühler’s deictic field is an already semiotized field, since it is topologically and spatially arranged and furnished with artifacts in certain configurations before the language activity starts (a few minutes before to centuries). So, the common perceptual field is also a common, socioculturally semiotized field that the subjects, as members of the same community, know how to read and how to talk and behave in. It can be argued that a semiotized field has its own agenda which is transmitted through practices and often enough uttered explicitly. The agenda is owned, negotiated in parts, or rejected by those who become actors in the field, and to be socialized means to know fields of one’s socio-culture by past experiences.

I would further argue that the stance to a field is not dependent upon the fact that the actors (or one of them) have or have not arranged the arrangement at hand, chosen the artifacts, as this will likely be in private fields such as houses with their specific rooms and zones of activities. A stance is always taken: the relationships between verbal content (meaning) and its context being the communication

situation and the audience always occurs (Vološinov, 1983a). The stance taken addresses in particular the agenda of the field (“yes, I love my kitchen! I made everything myself,” “well the living room is a little empty, but we wanted space for the dog...”). It should also be clear that no private room is private by its very agenda and remains subject to a specific agenda – “apartment therapy” is an interesting phenomenon to explore from the sociocultural and language psychological field point of view.<sup>11</sup>

Fields belonging to the institutional public sphere have a clearly institutional agenda that might be tinted with “personal taste” though personal objects and/or ways of acting in language where the three forms of Vološinov would be invoked to observe how they are displayed. Such fields are seminar rooms at universities, waiting areas at the dentist, independent theater space, or the interview room at the Homeland Security Office. Obviously, these fields were imagined for the twenty-first century, and displacing them 100 years back in our imagination makes clear how strongly the fields of our language activities have changed. And the change includes how the actors are dressed and behave, how they position each other and are positioned by the field and its agenda. In this sense, the field is an arena that positions; it expects certain roles together with certain positionings from specific participants, not from others. Certain genres of speech are expected (e.g., lecturing and silent listening; investigative questioning and obedient answering) that go together with certain types of voicings, gesturing; the whole habitus of the participants will be adjusted – even if in rejection – to the field. The invention of semi-public conversations in a setting where the persons sit oriented to each other is a historical becoming that created a specific genre of speech and of embodied, specifically configured selves working with a specific field (Linke, 2012). Knowing a semiotized field and such fields in general, we cannot not “field-act,” even if we do not know the present one.

The role of objects in these fields is highly interesting, as they function as potential props to activities. They can also be owed an agency, even a voice, and become part of the language activity, such as questionnaires in psychological interviews. The agency conferred can indicate a higher status instance that directs the activities of the human actors in the field, such as the company that wants the data and uses psychologists to gather them. Questions of power can be explored here, such as how power is enacted through things and voiced through representatives. The role of objects for human meaning-form-making is key, as is also the arrangement of space inside and outside of dwellings – psychological processes such as transitions include transitions between things in fields and roles of objects in fields toward which individuals can articulate their identity or self.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>“Apartment therapy” with its “before” and “after” can easily be explored online. I see here also links to Valsiner’s (2008) explorations of ornaments.

<sup>12</sup>Illuminating are the studies by Lelièvre and Marshall (2015) working at an anthropology of mobility. Important work on figures owed a voice and agency is done by Cooren (e.g., 2012); Zittoun’s (e.g., Zittoun, 2007) research on symbolic resources demonstrate how key objects are to

Based in the founding principle that human beings' relationship to their reality is mediated (including each other and themselves), I call the semiotized field "the field of mediated activity" as soon as an activity takes place that makes use of mediational means. The activities happening in such fields generate or realize the already semiotized field in specific ways through mediational means of different kinds: instruments, tools, signs, and in particular language signs – cooking, playing, working, and celebrating, all are socio-culturally and historically specific activities I understand as formations in spacetime since they are formed from and shape the activity. It has, for instance, a beginning, an end, a form, and a rhythmicity of some kind, with participants and objects forming certain constellations for a time being. Hence, the fields of mediated activity can be described as spatiotemporal, dynamic semiotic arrangements: the "semiotized field in process" so to speak. Of course, dynamics between the already semiotized and the presently unfolding field occur, as mentioned previously with the agenda of a field. Therefore, a semiotized field has a certain call that must be answered by the actors' mediated activities.

Language activity plays a core role in such fields, because it adds another and different unfolding onto the mediated field in process. It is important to note that language activities do not index the field nor mirror it. Rather, language activity confirms, contests, and alters the field, unfolding a reality of its own that is otherwise unconceivable and thus leaving it behind and re-imagining, inventing the field at hand through the power of displacement that starts here – a movement that still keeps its sociocultural embodied reality by creating versions of symbolic ties to the perceptual field, such as imagined bodies, things, and spacetimes. Hence, partners both use and transgress the field of mediated activity in continuous movements of detachment and attachment, of continuation and disruption. From another perspective, an intertwining of the field of mediated activity with the language activity occurs that both supports and alters their respective semiotic unfolding.

The projections in time and space, out into potential futures and possible selves to imagined others, speaking with never-heard voices and inventing forms of contact that were not yet experienced, are fielded and need to be fielded. This need can be explained by our human condition through our specific position (Plessner, 2019); it can also be explained using a dematerializing argument: if human beings are not partitioned into mind here and body there, thinking is deeply languaged, and languaged is embodied. Language signs seem to capture this versatility by leading through here-and-now and far out in common symbolic fields. Finally, language activity cannot exist in a completely field-independent way.

It is by this double movement of leaving and being anchored through the language sign that we are granted "acquaintance" with our reality – as Gadamer writes, language accords us "all our knowledge of ourselves and ... all knowledge of the world", and thus "familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us" (1977, 62-63). I see here the core of the syncretical psychology Valsiner

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significant transitions in life and how they play into psychological processes. Valsiner (2009) also explores the role of objects through Meinong's notion of *Gegenstand*.

aims to develop in multiple collaborations and recently in the *Yokohama Manifesto* (Valsiner et al., 2016): this psychology addresses human *Being* as “the process of existing—through construction of the human world” and recognizes these constructions as “specifically human ways of relating to their worlds” (Valsiner et al., 2016, p. vi).

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# Interpersonal Psychoanalysis as a Culturally Unique Field: A Semiotic Analysis



Philip J. Rosenbaum

## 1 Introduction: Cultural Aspects of Psychoanalytic Frames

Since its inception, psychoanalysis has been a decidedly cultural site of meaning making, intentionally differentiated from other meaning making sites, such as seeing one's physician or being in school (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). The uniqueness of the analytic field is clearly recognized when analysts and patients talk about being "socialized" to therapy. The implication here is that there are unique processes and conversations that occur within the therapeutic space different from those outside it. Speaking to this, analytic processes occur within what has been called "the frame," a highly regulated but also highly variable set of rules and processes that create boundaries around what takes place within and outside the analytic field (Gonzalez, 2016).

The frame begins with the establishment and maintenance of a shared context where analytic processes take place. It is here that we also begin to see substantial differences between schools of analytic thought and practice, not to mention practitioners who may belong to the same school of thought. My intention in briefly discussing these differences is not to argue which is "better" but rather to demonstrate how setting up the "frame" creates structures that allow for different experiences, such that it becomes clear how cultural analytic practice is done (Gonzalez, 2016).

For instance, the "classic" idea of analysis (at least classic in the United States, which I'll also refer to throughout as ego psychology) entails a patient lying on a couch and their analyst sitting behind them. The analyst is silent, a neutral "blank screen" onto which the patient "projects" their inner world of thoughts and feelings

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169

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that the analyst interprets not with respect to what is actually happening between the two of them, but from their metaphysical understanding of what the analysands utterances mean with respect to existing theory (Mitchell, 1988).

The frame in this case entails the physical setup, not only where each party is seated but the very location of the office and its makeup/decorations. Staying within this classical “frame” means that the analyst does not share their own subjective experiences but works to remain “neutral” and so an object onto which the patient can project. Times that the analyst may “break the frame” and so not be neutral are understood as their “acting out” and so require further analysis on the part of the analyst. Similarly, times that the patients break the frame, such as showing up late and not paying on time, are aspects of their own acting out, requiring interpretation to address the conduct and return the sanctity of the frame. Other aspects of the frame entail frequency (how often one goes to see their analyst), payment, vacations, cancellations, and so forth (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Mitchell, 1988).

From a cultural perspective, we might be curious (if not suspicious) about how highly choreographed and regulated this process is. Each of these various aspects of the “frame” might be understood as unique artifacts or symbolic resources of the analytic field (Zittoun, 2007), created and manipulated so as to facilitate certain types of meaning making. For example, Freud began to use the couch because he felt uncomfortable being stared out for hours (one also wonders who was doing the staring). Its ensuing adaptation into “practice” created a rigid structure, whereby if a treatment did not use the couch, or meet a certain number of times per week, it was not considered “analysis.” This regulation of practice contradicts Freud’s own more flexible approaches and was not based upon systematic study and experience but rather a need on the part of practitioners to “set standards.” Within the classical field especially, these standards were quickly reified as essentials taking what was conventional and making it essential.

The couch, for instance, served as an essential artifact, regulating what counted as “analysis” and who “counted” as an analyst, defining various fields (analytic and non-analytic). In turn, it regulated the types of meanings that were facilitated within the dyad and those that were discouraged. Not surprisingly, the strict hierarchical culture of ego psychology sets the vectors for which “non-analytic” practice could begin to develop and emerge. While the ego psychologists may have wished that all “non-analytic” practice would not only be discouraged but seen as lesser versions, their hubris ironically led in part to the proliferation of these “non-analytic” practices. Presently, therapies such as behavioral and cognitive behavioral therapy are not just considered valid forms of practice but challenge the analytic field directly. This happened locally in Philadelphia through the classical training sites rejecting one of its own members’ (Aaron Beck) requests to perform research on analytic process, leading to his development of his own cognitive behavioral psychotherapy (Rosner, 2012). Thus, as sites of culturally mediated meaning making, the analytic field, especially the classic analytic field, might be thought of a hyper-regulated, narrowly dictating certain meanings at the expense of others.

## 2 The Interpersonal Field

Other fields of analytic therapy also developed in this “non-analytic” space, including that of interpersonal psychoanalysis, which argued that “a person cannot be understood or even meaningfully thought about, except in the context of interactions with others” (Mitchell, 1997 p 68). Accordingly, the social world was crucially important to the development of individual beings and to the practice of analysis (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; Stern, 2003, 2013). As a result, for the interpersonal analyst, what transpired in reality, or at the very least the patient and analyst’s understanding of it – their interpretation of it and its elaboration into a semiotic system of navigating their environment mattered and was the subject of analysis (Levenson et al., 2005; Mitchell, 1997). This space held initially at the William Alanson White Institute in New York City and now more prominently within what has been termed the “relational turn” not only defined itself in dynamic tension with the classical school (reading the work of Harry Stack Sullivan and how confusing it can be clearly indicates this tension) but remains a space of unique cultural meaning making.

From an interpersonal perspective, the frame and so site of meaning making shifted. To begin, the analyst and analysand could choose to use the couch or not. Sitting across from one another was for many preferable, because it provided more information. Being able to see the patient and for them to see the analyst opened up processes of meaning making that had been forcibly closed before. Seeing each other makes it nearly impossible to be a “blank screen” as patient and analyst can react to subtle body cues, gaze, and utterances (note that this of course happened in ego psychology as well but was occluded from the field of meaning making in the pursuit of the objective analyst). From the beginning, there was an emphasis on the shared humanity of patient and the analyst and the sense that each were going about living in as best as a way as possible (Sullivan, 1953a).

Initially, the analyst was considered a participant-observer (Sullivan, 1953a, b), both engaging with the patient and also observing the interactions, pointing out patterns of conduct and cognitive and affective distortions that may keep particular styles of meaning intact. Interpretation and interaction were intended to clarify these distortions such that he could interact more freely. Over time, however, the interpersonal field has shifted such that the analyst is seen as co-participant, involved in a co-constructed process of meaning making (Stern, 2009). This process, by which patient works together with the analyst to co-create meaning, is at the heart of the analytic and therapeutic endeavor and continues to evolve.

Presently, the frame is structured by considerations that the analytic relationship is mutual but asymmetrical (Aron, 2001). It is in other words still slanted toward the analyst holding power but is also much more democratic. The patient is seen as a partner in thought (Stern, 2004), an interlocutor, and a co-participant, someone to work with toward the creation of meaning (Gonzalez, 2016). Accordingly, whereas the classical view emphasizes the determination of meaning by the application of existing metatheory in a top-down fashion onto the patient, in contemporary

practice, meaning is co-constructed from the bottom up in ways that are sensitive to the patient's particular history and context. As such, the analytic process has to begin with focusing on establishing conditions of safety and trust for the patient. This often means navigating real differences and discrepancies, such as power, identities, class, race, and so forth that always exist within the dyad (Mitchell, 1997).

The goals of analysis have also shifted from resolving certain pre-ordained conflicts, or correcting developmental deficits, toward encouraging more authentic and spontaneous (so freer) expressions of self. Theories of development, conflict, the unconscious, and so forth exist and operate in the background but are now secondary to theories of process intended on explicating both what is transpiring in the patient's life as well as what is going on between analyst and patient. Toward this end, the frame accommodates not just more of the patient's experiences and expressions but also the analyst as well. Indeed, analysis can only proceed based upon what is available between the dyad within the interpersonal field (Stern, 2015).

Contemporary practice thus focuses on both the *processes of relating* between self and other, as well as the meanings made by each party. When all goes well<sup>1</sup> analysis becomes a fascinating dialectical process, moving from current experiences in the world and with the analyst to past experience back to current experience (Levenson, 2003). The process of looking closely at real relationships, including between the analyst and patient, has been termed the "detailed inquiry" (Sullivan, 1953c). Through the inquiry, the present is washed through the waters of the past, offering new opportunities not only to understand but also to (re)signify key events.

This allows for a dynamic system that focuses both upon the here-and-now relating of analyst and patient, as well as the there-and-then dynamics of their life. The analyst's serves as both a new and old object, a new and old person that is the partial impetus for new experiencing and meaning making (Greenberg, 2001; Mitchell, 1988). With respect to this uniqueness, we might literally say that the analyst stands in relation to me as "non-me" (me <> not-me) calling forth the idea of co-genetic logic (Valsiner, 1995; Tateo, 2016). It is in navigating this different relationships of self and other within the context of the interpersonal field, whereby the patients meaning making processes are under discussion that creates the dynamic tension for development of new meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Here, patient and analyst alike are seen as engaged in semiotic (symbolic) processes of representing the full range of their experiences to one another. While a strong emphasis still exists on verbal processes, contemporary practice is

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<sup>1</sup>Though rarely does all go well, indeed as Harry Stack Sullivan is also credited as saying "God keep me from a therapy that goes well and God keep me a clever therapist!" (Levenson, 1982 p 4).

<sup>2</sup>There is likely an interesting discussion on the conditions of the field by which the analyst emerges/exists as an "other" to engage with in making meaning. The therapeutic literature is ripe with examples of the patient not treating the analyst as "other" but rather as first as an "object." From the perspective of co-genetic logic, the analyst in literally occupying a space of "not-me" to the patient's "me" has to be allowed to develop into an "other." There are numerous reasons why the analyst may not from the patients perspective be allowed to develop their own "subjectivity" and instead remain to the patient an object within the me <> non-me field to be controlled, manipulated, and so forth.

increasingly sensitive to the various ways each party situates themselves. This situatedness is expressed in emotions, tone, body language, and other non-verbal forms of communication. Patient and analyst alike are responding unconsciously and implicitly to these non-verbal forms of communication. Notably, if the conditions are right, these non-verbal communications can also be made explicit by either party. This adds layers of meaning making to the process. Enriching it for sure but also perhaps complicating it as well. How someone says something is almost as meaningful as what it said.

Whereas before, the analyst was discouraged from thinking about their own experience, the relational turn has emphasized the analyst's subjectivity. How the analyst feels listening to the patient's narrative becomes an important source of data as well. Feeling tired, bored, twitchy, angry, excited, etc. can be reflected upon and shared as it is seen as occurring within the interpersonal field. While it may be coming from the analyst's unique history that it is occurring during a session with a particular patient is seen potentially relevant and meaningful.

These shifts in the analytic frame toward process over content are well suited to be explicated from a cultural lens, which also values understanding psychological process. Using a cultural lens to analyze what happens within the analytic field helps deepen our understanding of how analyst and patient co-construct meaning.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the application of a cultural lens to the therapeutic process is similar to the process of inquiring into a patient's narrative (Sullivan, 1953c). Such an inquiry shares considerably with microgenetic analysis within cultural psychology, providing a chance to slow down the meaning making process and look at it frame by frame. In this way, analyst and patient alike can elaborate upon personal meaning of words, stories, and feelings and look at how one thought and feeling lead to the next.

In what follows, I discuss some of the ongoing semiotic processes I see as occurring within the therapeutic process. This is not meant to be a fully comprehensive list but rather a chance to explore and articulate how some therapeutic processes appear through a cultural and particularly semiotic mediation lens.

### 3 The Semiotic and Cultural Within the Interpersonal Field

**Reflection** The process by which the analyst shares, either verbally or non-verbally, their understanding of the patient's narratives is often referred to as reflective listening or "mirroring." Despite the sense of simplicity that these words imply, this process is far from simple. Indeed, these terms imply that the analyst is only showing or reflecting back to the patient what they are saying and feeling, akin to as if the

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<sup>3</sup>This is not necessarily new. For instance, Harry Stack Sullivan (1953a, b) based much of his Interpersonal Psychiatry (and psychoanalysis) upon his understandings of American Pragmatism. Similarly, other interpersonal analysts have discussed the semiotic systems of their patients (Levenson, 1989; Levenson et al., 2005).

analyst was a mirror. This is a mischaracterization of the semiotic and interpersonal processes occurring.

Reflective listening entails not just saying back certain words and/or feelings but rather a type of embodied and experiential listening, whereby the analyst necessarily allows themselves to experience and feel as much as possible what they are being told. They open themselves up to the full range of the patient's expressive capacity. When reflecting they hope to convey both aspects of the patient's experience that they may have been aware of and perhaps other aspects that the patient may not have been.

This occurs when the analyst opens themselves in such a capacity (similar to how Peirce (1907/1998) describes signification as hearing an equivalent or more developed sign or idea) that they not only hear content but they also experience it as well. In this manner, they make themselves available to feel the affective location of the patient's "Here-Now-I-System" with respect to the level of abstraction the patient's semiotic system is operating at (Valsiner, 2002). Listening in this fashion helps to establish the parameters of the field where meaning will be made.

For example, when listening to someone whose experiences are unfocused (level 0 within the hierarchy), the analyst may find themselves disorganized. While listening may help to constrain both experiences, it is important that the analyst also be available to remain within the experience of disorganization. Listening to both the content and the affective experiencing allows for a response that holds the patient in mind and provides grounding for further elaboration and development of this experience.

In working to meet the patient where they are located the analyst also monitors their own experience. This helps them remain sensitive to how the patient's semiotic systems are working to help the patient pre-adapt to an uncertain future by bridging the gap to the known past (Valsiner, 2001). The pre-adaptive function of signs often entails the overgeneralized ways in which signs work to constrain future experiencing. Notably, these processes are similar to psychological defense mechanisms that operate unconsciously and are intended on keeping the patient "safe" from threatening experiences.

One of the ways that these defenses are experienced is as boundaries around meaning making. These boundaries delimit spaces whereby the patient and analyst can work rather easily together as well as spaces that may be harder or impossible to traverse. For instance, Harry Stack Sullivan (1953a) differentiated between different self-experiences ("good me"; "bad me"; "not me") that he saw as feeding into certain experiences of self (Green, 1962). These self-experiences contribute to different types of relationships with other people whereby certain zones or domains of experience may be more or less off limits. These boundaries as well as different semiotic regulators can and often become the further focus of the analytic process.

***Amplification*** One of the ways analysts focus on certain aspects of the patient's narrative is amplification. Here, the analyst amplifies certain aspects of what they are hearing and feeling. Sometimes, this entails highlighting an important part of the patient's narrative, such as a feeling or idea. At other times, however, amplification

may involve moving certain experiences into the foreground, which for whatever reason the patient (or analyst) were locating within the background.

For example, in a recent session, a patient began by talking about something that felt like a small insult by a friend. This was not the topic that the patient had “intended” to talk about, but something about their tone and word choice struck me; so, I asked them to slow down and reflected back to them some of their word choice. Through doing, I began to amplify some aspect of their experience, including feelings of being hurt and betrayed that I felt that the patient had been moving to the background suggesting that there may be more to it than they necessarily considered.

When we underline or magnify certain words, feelings, or experiences, we are signifying that from our perspective, there is something important and more to what we are being told. This is of course based upon not only the content of what a patient says but also how what is said resonates and moves through us. As stated above, as a dialogical interlocutor, we make ourselves available for ongoing signification in a real manner. Moreover, within the interpersonal field, we remain committed to sharing what may be occurring within us in as reasonably a transparent way as possible.

Amplification helps bring semiotic processes to the forefront so that they can be slowed down and explored. At one level, this can allow for the patient to elaborate on some aspect of the field of experience. Thus, amplification allows patient and analyst to expand upon a particular zone of meaning. In the example above, my patient was able to talk more about their feeling of being hurt by their friend. As they stayed with this idea, they talked about their current experience and then began relating it to previous experiences. In this respect, the field of meaning “hurt” developed and became more fleshed out. Simultaneously, we also began to explore and discuss reasons why the patient may not have been able to express their hurt in the initial telling of the story.

There are likely multiple reasons why patients tell stories in these fashions. Some of this may be defensive on their part, presenting something that they are anxious about. For example, being “hurt” may be seen as having a childish reaction, and it is important to not show one’s feelings. Alternatively, feelings, thoughts, and ideas may not have been registered as meaningful or worth focusing upon. This is a form of selective inattention (Sullivan, 1953a) or dissociation themselves from making meaning about it (Stern, 2004), by which a patient does not formulate their experiences. When there is trauma or threatening environments, patients frequently lack the time and space to safely think about their experiences. Even when things are relatively safe, an important component of human existence is the creation of stable patterns by which to simplify the meaning making processes.

**Deconstruction** Reflection and amplification help to establish the parameters and structure the field of meaning for the process of deconstruction. Here, certain ideas, feelings, and assumptions that the patient may have been consciously or unconsciously operating from can be broken down, uncoupled, and explored to understand where they originated from and how they are maintained. This process can occur indirectly as patients hear themselves speak about a certain topic and so

become a listener to their own narrative (Valsiner, 2007) or more direct forms of challenge and questioning from the analyst.

When deconstructed, patients realize that meanings that were attached to experiences and stories may be more fungible than they realized and so become open to new meanings, additions, or transformations. Accordingly, they are able to better appreciate how their sign systems both emerged and how they guide future meaning making (represent but also *pe-present*). This loosens the boundaries within the semiotic field allowing for newer possibilities that could not be experienced within the pre-existing constraints.

For example, a patient was talking about the way that their parent would go to the bathroom after meals and often could be heard throwing up. When the patient would ask their parent about this later on, often expressing concern, the parent would say that they were simply a bit nauseous from something else and that they now felt better. For the patient, this was a normative experience, one that they had long since stopped thinking about. The analyst heard it differently and began to wonder if the parent was bulimic and so asked questions about how often this happened, what did the parent look like, where did it occur, and so forth. Through deconstructing this event, the patient began to see that it was considerably less normal than they thought it was – for instance, noting that none of their friend’s parents seemed to do this.

An important aspect of holding the space for deconstruction is resisting the tendency that humans have of quickly making meaning and organizing narratives (Levenson, 2003). Semiotically, staying beneath the plane of existing or easy to reach meanings helps the analyst limit their abstraction toward higher-level organizing signs but instead expanding possible significations. The analyst still associates and signifies meaning but rather than try to apply it in a “lazy” fashion the work to propagate the field of possible meaning (Valsiner, 2002).

Resisting understanding and so refusing to organize the patient’s narrative for them helps remain with processes of reflection and amplification and not providing an organizing interpretation. Reflection and amplification focus on the details of the story and try and explore what is happening with the patient and what is also being left out (inattended to). The push for multiple meanings is not an effort to “correct” the patient’s narrative but instead to loosen the boundaries constraining it. Once loosened, the patient may be free to explore fields that had been inaccessible.

Deconstruction highlights how much of meaning making is based both upon social and cultural conventions. Through deconstructing the patient’s experience, the analyst demonstrates the possibilities of multiple forms of experiencing and meaning making such that there does not have to be a singular way of engaging. This aspect of the analytic experience harkens to the existential and Sartre (2020), and the possibilities of being many things and not a single essential thing.

**Regulation** As the patient’s narrative becomes deconstructed, space hopefully opens up for considering the ways the patient regulates their experiencing with themselves and with others. Simplistically, the analytic field allows for closed systems to become more open and at times for overly open systems to become a bit more closed (Lysaker & Lysaker, 2006). Thus, within the analytic field, specific sign

functions that serve as “abstractive generalizers,” such as core concepts around identity (“I am a good student” “I am an athlete”) or strong affective feelings (“love” “shame”), are seen as overly determining and so regulating the intra- and interpersonal fields (Valsiner, 2002). From this perspective, symptoms, whether depression, anxiety, obsessional thoughts, and so forth, may all be considered abstract signs, regulating future meaning making processes in ways that may not be currently adaptive and are perhaps serving other purposes.

This view provides a non-pathologizing lens toward looking at symptoms. Disrupting is a way of trying to change closed systems. In observing, challenging, and interpreting, the analyst hopes to be able to remediate and re-regulate what were otherwise patterned personalized structures. Alternatively, processes of amplification and exploration of different aspects of patient’s narratives may serve to create linkages and regulate structures that could be too open and so chaotic.

For instance, in one session, a student-patient described a pervasive feeling of performance anxiety (level 0 → 1). They were specifically scared of doing badly on a test. In talking about this, it became clear that their sense of identity was based upon their academic performance. Performing badly would have been embarrassing (level 1 → 2) and caused them to view themselves as a “bad person,” that they were “all bad” (level 2 → 3). This came with a host of negative feelings (level 3 → 4), which they were working to avoid. Most notably, these feelings created tremendous pressure on them around the exam that could occasionally be harnessed so they may study but usually led to procrastination and avoidance.

Notably, one view of symptoms is that they emerge from patients’ inability to utilize semiotic systems: an inability to successfully navigate the world and make meaning from the ongoing experiencing of self and other (Levenson et al., 2005). When an individual becomes stuck, they are unable to flexibly make meaning, experiencing self and other as “the way things are.” In the example above, the student could not re-regulate their experience by say recalling the times they have done well on “tests.” The overwhelming anxiety (level 4) functioned to prevent access to other parts of himself.

Intervention in this case entailed a blend of the processes described earlier. Reflective listening and observation established the boundaries of meaning making, while amplification helped to develop the field. Through deconstructive efforts, the patient became aware of the overgeneralizations at play, where a bad performance meant feeling like a bad person. From here, we talked about the regulatory relationship between performance, feedback, and what was internalized. This created newer spaces for meaning making.

Speaking to this, the former Lacanian analyst Stuart Schneiderman (1990) in remarking on Lacan’s view of the symptom writes: “[Lacan] declares that the cutting edge of psychoanalytic interpretation is equivocation....The symptom is kept in place, is nourished and sustained by the belief that words maintain a singular relationship to meanings....The function of equivocation is to subvert treatment, to institute a break between subject and symptom, and thus to permit the symptom’s

wording to rediscover the discourse it was part of before it was misappropriated by the subject” (p 219–220).

From the perspective of the interpersonal analyst as well as the cultural psychologist then (and the Lacanian), there is no essential or core self from which to speak as there is no ultimate truth, theory, or knowledge. Rather, there are various processes of development by which identities, truths, and ideas are constructed and articulated and then deconstructed, de-differentiated, and collapsed so that new experiences may develop. While we organize and articulate toward stability in the face of uncertainty, the truth if there is such a thing is only what emerges within and from the discourse and dialogue and then reemerges.

***Enactment and transformation*** A final important aspect of considering the semiotic processes within the therapeutic space is of enactment and transformation. The processes of relating within the analytic field creates a tension between analyst and patient to also enact what is being talked about. For example, the student-patient described above later experienced his “badness” in relationship to me. This came about as his overgeneralized semiotic and regulatory system functioned within our relationship. Thus, analysis became a place of “performance” whereby the patient wanted to be “good” but felt himself as “bad” when he did not “perform” in ways that he felt he was supposed to.

Crucially, while the analyst resists transformation, in this case into a harsh evaluator/critic, from an interpersonal (and semiotic) perspective, this transformation and enactment is inevitable (Levenson, 1983/2005). Accordingly, despite my desire to not come across as another critical person, at one later point in the session, I found myself viewing and responding more critically and “judgey” to my patient’s narrative struggles around being “good” and “bad.” In this way, the patient and I began to regulate each other’s conduct, enacting out the very thing under discussion.

What makes this inevitable from an interpersonal perspective is our willingness and capacity as semiotic others who signify and embody certain experiences that creates the conditions for enactment. In opening ourselves up to the full range of the patient’s narrative and semiotic experience, we hope to be able to resist a transformation but also create the conditions for it. Working through this transformation with the patient such that they have the experience in real time (and with a real interlocutor) allows for other important transformations.

Notably, it is the capacity for this type of transformation within the interpersonal field that is perhaps what is so freeing and transgressive about analysis. The analyst in their radical commitment to being available as a real Other, without other specific metaphysical orientation hopes to help the patient become a partner in the ongoing dialogue about their lives Markova (2003a, b). In other words, in demonstrating, both the conventional aspects of relating and meaning making as well as the idiosyncratic ways a patient’s semiotic system may have developed within specific familial and cultural relationships, the analyst hopes to enable the patient to voice their own desires, thoughts, and feelings freely.

Crucially, as part of this process, the analyst to a large extent is willing to also deconstruct their authority in the service of the patient’s self-authorization. While

theory serves as an anchor and one possible direction of meaning making the focus on the patient's experience before theory ensures that the venture is toward the creation of meaning. Speaking to this, the analyst Stephen Mitchell (1988) describes the process of therapy as making meaning and generating insight in a session only to how it unravels in-between sessions, akin to Penelope and her loom (p 274). Similarly, Wilfred Bion (1967) famously remarked that the analyst should enter into sessions without memory or desire. While of course, he was aware of the impossibility of this, his suggestion I think is of being willing to subject oneself to a process that is beyond immediate control. That when we truly enter into the interpersonal field as a partner in dialogue (Stern, 2015), we open ourselves up to the possibilities of surprise and transformation in new and unexpected ways.

It is the negotiation of these transformative processes that develops as analyst and patient are working jointly to understand one another that promotes change. As patient and analyst discuss back and forth, exchanging ideas thoughts and feelings meanings are continuously being created, deconstructed, and explored. Much like with Peirce's emphasis on semiosis, the analytic field itself becomes one of ongoing and continual meaning making (Rosa, 2007). Through doing so, patients become more culturally adept at being able to explore their own self-organizations and so to adapt to varying situations.

## 4 A Case Example

James,<sup>4</sup> a Caucasian, white cis-gender male graduate student in anthropology who I (also, a cis-gender white male) have known for a little over a year and have been working with on issues related to anxiety and depression, was talking with me in a recent session about control. He described feeling like it was really important for him to be in control and that in situations where he felt anxious and as if other people could not be trusted, he reacted by exerting even more control over himself. This caused him to physiologically tighten up and feel tense and rigid but also incredibly attuned to his experience in such a way that he was hyperaware of his thoughts, feelings, and reactions. This incredible sensitivity allowed him to closely observe other people in such a way that as we talked, he became aware of feeling in control of not only himself but also over them.

One of the ways he stayed in control, for example, was when presenting news to someone that he felt that they may not want to hear, James would lay out everything that had happened, how he was taking responsibility or working to resolve it and acknowledge as much as possible what was his fault. He in other words thought of everything. This felt safe for James, even if it was also exhausting, physically draining (causing stomach issues), and not particularly satisfying. While it would

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<sup>4</sup>James has given consent to have his information used in the anonymized way it is presented in this paper. He has also read this paper and given feedback to me.

perhaps limit the ire of the other person, it also limited their agency and prevented more meaningful forms of collaboration.

Over the course of the next few sessions, we focused on the irony here about the feelings of being in control and not being in control. Notably, in our talks, we focused on how intellectualized and abstract he became in these instances, trying to plan and account for every last detail. Ironically (Wachtel, 2008), his hyper-generalized need to be in control and his fear of being out of control led me to also feeling controlled by him. I felt pushed away, unable to help alleviate his anxiety, and also limited in the topics and questions I could ask about.<sup>5</sup>

As I began to share my observations both with regard to himself and to my experiences of him, we began to better able put into words what was happening with respect to the need to be in control. As we talked more, it became clear that not only did James not entirely trust other people but, in these circumstances, he lost a sense of trust in himself that could only be gained by re-regulating his attention. Through doing so, he limited his helpless feelings around how others would treat him; however he also prevented himself from being cared for.

This discussion began to slowly deconstruct the semiotic system James used to regulate his experience such that a new organization began to emerge. This in effect brought him from a hyper-generalized system (level 4) toward more awareness of the system (level 3) enabling discussion of his specific feelings and antecedents to them (level 2 and level 1). Not only were we able to understand his conduct through his familial history, but we also took into account the other cultures, such as college and work, that he was and continues to be a part of.

This essentially closed system had strong affective boundaries within possible fields of meaning making. These boundaries served to keep James safe, guiding specific meanings at the exclusion of others. The dynamic relationship between control  $\leftrightarrow$  non-control was such that being in control was “good,” while the entire “non-control” field was bad (Valsiner, 2007, 2014). Within this “bad” field were subfields, including both the conscious aspects that James could become aware of through the detailed exploration of his affective states, but also, likely areas that were also so cordoned off as to not yet exist at conscious levels. In opening up these areas, James gained more agency over his experiencing and felt less anxiety and fear.

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<sup>5</sup>Notably, while a bit outside the scope of this paper, with regard to understanding this, we began to talk more about earlier experiences with his parents, especially his father, a brilliant but unpredictable man, prone to outbursts of rage and anger. We discussed how overwhelming and even terrifying these could be for James, who would feel awash in his father’s emotional tantrums and scared of drowning in it. In turn, he developed a way of modulating his father’s moods as an adaptive security operation (akin to a defense mechanism) that operated in the background serving to keep him as safe as possible. He had in other words developed a strategy for navigating the world that functioned by creating simple dichotomies with respect to self and other, i.e., he was either in control or out of control; safe or unsafe; and so forth.

## 5 A Personal Conclusion

On a personal note, the ability to articulate oneself in ways that are personally meaningful and interesting is something I associate directly in my studies with Jaan. Over morning coffee at 6 AM in his office at Clark University, we would discuss whatever readings he had given me the days prior or that I had found in the neighboring journal room. Jaan was always gracious and generous with his time talking to an undergraduate student almost as a peer, instructing, cajoling, and encouraging. In his way, with as little ego as I have ever experienced in someone (especially, someone so accomplished), Jaan stressed the importance of being free to pursue one's own work and personal projects. While this eventually took me toward clinical psychology and not academic psychology, as I hope to have shown the emphases on process and making meaning within a culture and not imposing it on-top has been something that has guided and held me throughout my personal and professional growth. It is safe to say that Jaan has been one of the great influences on my life and one that I remain grateful and thankful for.

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**Part IV**  
**Cultural Transmission and Transformation**

# Culture as a Creative Process



Vlad P. Glăveanu

There are hundreds of definitions of culture (Jahoda, 2012), but only a handful are process ones. The vast majority refer to components such as language, customs and religion, themselves understood in static terms. One ‘has’ a culture or ‘belongs’ to one, instead of participating to cultural processes that ‘become’ rather than ‘are’. And yet, culture has been interpreted in dynamic terms by scholars and currents that are foundational for the cultural psychology of today, from pragmatism (Mead, 1934) to cultural-historical theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and from dialogism (Holquist, 2002) to semiotics (Peirce, 1932). In this context, Jaan Valsiner’s work is unique for drawing on all of these influences in formulating a developmental and semiotic cultural psychology (Valsiner, 1997, 2000, 2007a), one that considers the emergence and evolution of culture in irreversible time: sociogenetic (or societal), ontogenetic (in the life course) and, most of all, microgenetic (in the here and now). For Valsiner and his colleagues, culture is in a constant process of construction and reconstruction, maintenance and transformation, and stabilization and active creation.

It is the last point that I dedicate this short chapter to: the unlikely relation – for some – between creativity and culture. There are reasons many psychologists would consider this an odd pairing. On the one hand, there is the long history of seeing creativity as a purely individual attribute and as an expression of difference and of one’s uniqueness (Montuori & Purser, 1995; Hanson, 2015); on the other hand, culture is associated with what is social, shared and basically the same between people belonging to a given group or community (Triandis, 2001; Hofstede, 2011). As I argued elsewhere, though, it is not only the case that creativity is a thoroughly sociocultural psychological process but culture itself is creative at its core (Glăveanu,

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2014). In making this assertion, I am not relying on the easy assumption that every cultural achievement is also a creative one or that creativity basically uses existing cultural resources to generate new ones; I propose that processes intrinsic to the acquisition and development of culture – e.g. internalization and externalization, transmission, diffusion and transformation – are all essentially creative. Culture itself becomes a creative process. What evidence can we bring to support this claim?

## 1 Creativity, Culture and Time

In order to answer this question, we have to come back to the temporal dimension. It is by considering both creativity and culture in their unfolding, across different temporalities, that their processual nature is revealed and, more than this, that they clearly become intertwined. To take a simple example, a decorated Easter egg is both a cultural and creative artefact (Glăveanu, 2010, 2013). And yet, to consider the egg as a finished product and compare it with other decorated eggs is not enough. What we need to appreciate is the longer tradition this craft reflects and its deep cultural roots, in Christianity and before it (Newall, 1984). We need to also examine the processes of making or of crafting and their material and social contingencies that lead a particular egg to be decorated in a particular way. And we should also focus on the person of the decorator, not as an isolated artisan but a member of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) and participant in lifelong apprenticeships (Rogoff, 2003). Finally, we must bring all these elements together, in a similar way in which Boesch discussed the systemic and developmental emergence of the sound of the violin (Boesch, 1993). In the same manner, the creative cultural process of decorating a single egg is distributed across actors, places, and time. And it is precisely this distribution that holds together the creativity of culture and the culture(s) of creativity.

The first temporal frame that demonstrates the creative nature of culture as process is that of sociogenesis. From the start, human societies have been built around cultural innovation and their diffusion (Festinger, 1983). The ‘discovery’ and use of fire, the invention of the wheel, the first domestication of animals and the first cave paintings – all of these primordial acts of creativity didn’t involve a single person or even group, and they also spread across millennia. There is a lesson here as to how we understand creative cultural processes – they are far from singular moments of revolutionary insight (Sternberg & Davidson, 1995) but require, in each case, wide networks of people, resources and interactions, as well as the passing of time. Instead of instantaneous creation out of thin air (*ex nihilo*), the cultural history of our creativity is built on both the new and the old, individuals and collectives, and innovation and imitation (Tarde, 1903). Second, material and symbolic forms of culture that ‘surround’ us today and that we internalize as personal culture(s) (Valsiner, 2007b) were all, at some point, the outcomes of creativity. Even the most mundane things, like chairs, tables and houses, had to be invented and, most importantly, reinvented many times over across sociogenesis. The creativity of cultural

processes doesn't therefore begin and end at specific points; rather, it is continuous with what existed before and with the myriad of artefacts that are inspired by them.

This is where we arrive at a clearer understanding of sociogenetic processes that are, at once, creative and cultural. Key among them is what we can call transformation-through-transmission. This is the well-documented mechanism which helped the spread of early innovations (Mithen, 2005) and is the basis, among others, for wider cultural diffusion (Rogers, 2003) and user innovation (von Hippel, 2009). Basically, at this scale, creative cultural processes require the participation of multiple individuals and communities, from makers to audiences, all contributing across time to the more or less marked modification of an earlier invention. Examples include everything from the transformation of architectural styles across time and space to the ever-increasing number of functionalities for smartphones. One of the most interesting features of transformation-through-transmission is that it blurs the line between creators and their public and credits the latter for creative emergence as much as the former. It is not only the case that users actively change existing creations through use, but 'simple' acts of interpretation are intrinsically creative. As Dewey (1934) argued, audiences play a crucial role in creative work as they help creators understand their productions with new eyes. This is also why creators themselves need to recurrently become 'audiences' to their own process in order to push it forward in new and original ways (Glăveanu, 2015).

The last observation makes it all the more important to relate sociogenetic time with ontogenetic development and, in this way, to consider the creative and cultural processes that make up a human life course on the background of broader societal changes, and the other way around, shedding light on social transformation through a focus on individual development. And, if we are to properly consider the latter, we can raise the question of how and when creativity first 'emerges' and the consequences of its emergence for our existence as social and cultural beings. These are the kind of questions Winnicott (1971) was concerned with when he elaborated his detailed account of play and development. According to him, creativity and culture are twin born within episodes of pretend play (Glăveanu, 2009), an association that comes to confirm the intertwined nature of both these phenomena. The reason why, ontologically, creative action and cultural appropriation depend on each other is because they are both enabled by the first use of symbols by the young child. This capacity to signify and re-signify reality constitutes the basis of not only play and creativity but also all higher mental functions and lays the ground for the accumulation and transformation of culture. As such, cultural participation throughout the life course is defined by one's creative engagement with tools and signs, with values and norms, and with other individuals and communities.

An essential creative cultural process at the heart of this engagement is meaning-making. Both cultural, through the use of symbolic means, and creative – through the generation of new understandings – meaning-making has been long assumed to underlie pretend play. Vygotsky (1967) interestingly noted that in this regard that, during episodes of play, the field of meaning takes over the field of perception. In other words, although the child knows what things are and perceives them as such, he or she relates to them as what they are not. Here and now is not replaced but

supplemented by a then and there made available through re-signification and the work of imagination (Harris, 2000). As such, well beyond childhood, meaning-making processes reveal the world as flexible and open to new perspectives and forms of action. From the most mundane instances of reinterpreting past or present events to the construction of master narratives that live on in the form of books and movies and in popular culture, meaning-making is ubiquitous and, in many ways, distinctively human. Its defining characteristic rests in how it manages to keep in balance the familiar and the unfamiliar, what we already know and what we are yet to learn. In the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 2001), it is postulated that the creation of social meanings depends on ‘making the unfamiliar familiar’ or anchoring the new within the old. This process is far from uncreative; while it does help to conventionalize novelties and ‘tame’ their unfamiliarity, it does so in ways that end up transforming both novel and existing meanings (something discussed by Piaget, 2003, in terms of assimilation and accommodation). Interestingly, meaning-making processes can also take the path of ‘making the familiar unfamiliar’ (Wagoner, 2008), questioning the taken for granted in search of new and surprising understandings of things and events.

Uncovering such pathways and movements within creative cultural processes requires, in the end, a microgenetic focus. This temporal lens allows us to examine the moment-to-moment unfolding of thought, action and interaction that is not disconnected from but fully articulated with ontogenetic development and sociogenetic transformation. Despite the long duration of creative activities and the historical accumulation of culture, it is equally the case that both these phenomena are ‘performed’ in the here and now of direct experience, at the encounter between self and other, and mind and context. There is no absolute, static cultural system that exists in abstract terms, but, at all times, culture is enacted and embodied. The same can be said about creativity, a process that requires the immersion of the creator in acts of making (see the notion of flow in Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) balanced by the possibility of taking reflective distance (see the notion of wonder in Glăveanu, 2020). Dewey had, once more, a useful way of capturing this interplay in his well-known discussion of doing and undergoing (Dewey, 1934), the building blocks of artistic experiences and, in the end, of any human experience. The ongoing cycles of action and perception, making and observing, and impulsive gesture and reflective pause are essential for creativity across domains (Glăveanu et al., 2013). And they are also fundamental for the construction and reconstruction of culture through performative action (Tulloch, 1999).

What are the creative cultural processes that stand out at the microgenetic level? One of them certainly has to do with tinkering or experimentation. This is the process by which people try out different forms of action in order to explore their consequences and to select the most successful ones. Its relation to risk-taking and the possibility of learning from failure give tinkering its creative quality (Tahirsylaj, 2012), while the fact that it involves intentionality, changing goals, various meanings and practical tools also makes it thoroughly cultural. This form of acting has as well deep developmental roots. Baldwin (1894) usefully distinguished in this regard between simple and persistent imitation, the latter holding great creative potential.

When persistently imitating, the young child (as well as the adult later on) tries out variations of an established action with the aim of improving its outcomes. In this way, children's pretend play, for example, is never just imitative but creative (Russ, 2003). Culture itself is maintained not through the mindless repetition of traditions but the persistent imitation of old practices in experimental new ways (Negus & Pickering, 2004). While we tend to notice those that result in revolutionary novelities, most creative and cultural action is evolutionary and adaptive.

Another interesting microgenetic process refers to the 'mixing and matching' of cultural elements. Association and combination have been placed, for a long time, at the root of creativity (Simonton, 2010) and, more broadly, of our entire psychological life (for a discussion of learning, see Shanks, 2007). It is certainly the case that we can only imagine and create by combining what exists in new ways (Vygotsky, 1991) which shows, one more, the continuing between past, present and future in creative action. It also points to its cultural nature by emphasizing the fact that old ways of thinking and doing things are never abandoned but transformed. Mixing and matching can be noticed in children's drawing and the work of inventors as well as participation on social media. For the latter, Internet memes offer a concrete example of how cultural content is being reworked by social media users in order to achieve various aims, from being humorous to contributing to social and political critique (Glăveanu et al., 2018). Importantly, the value of memes is given both by the creative transformation of existing material and by a strong anchoring in formats and genres specific for the online environment. In this sense, the mixing of cultural context requires the matching of the new with the old.

## 2 Pragmatist Consequences

Towards the end, we should raise the question of the pragmatist value of considering culture not only as a process but specifically as a creative process. Arguments for why culture is essentially a process are offered throughout this book, but why a creative one? Do we gain any extra explanatory power from adopting this view, or any new methodological insights? What about practical means to intervene in the world? As you would expect, my answer is yes for all these questions. Conceptually, we profit from adding transformation-through-transmission, meaning-making and re-signification, tinkering and experimentation, and mixing and matching to our 'usual' list of processes such as internalization and externalization, assimilation and accommodation, doing and undergoing, simple and persistent imitation, and so on. We gain most of all from noticing the links between all these processes and how they become manifest at different temporal dimensions, how they each engage materiality, and how they build on networks of social interaction. Methodologically, the study of creativity as cultural and of cultural as creative invites us to consider the interconnection between mind and body, self and other, and person and context in each and every performance of our identity as creative and cultural beings. More specifically, it pushes us to recognize the material and embodied substrate of both

creativity and culture. Last but not least, we can use some of the processes and principles outlined above to design educational interventions and reflect on existing practices.

In the end, cultural psychology is a form of basic science (Valsiner, 2007a), but its ultimate value is measured in how it shifts our understanding of the world, of other people and of our own self. Creativity is recognized as a prized skill of the twenty-first century (Henriksen et al., 2016) but often for the ‘wrong’ reasons – it is used to celebrate individualism, the supposed break with tradition and the ‘creative’ (or, rather, destructive) exploitation of the environment. The work of recovering creativity as a sociocultural category has started years ago (Glăveanu et al., 2015), but there is more to be done. And, if I am right, cultural psychologists at large will benefit from this reappropriation of the term by renewing their commitment to understanding human beings as essentially agentic, within constraints and because of them (Gruber et al., 2014). Jaan Valsiner’s work has been extremely fruitful in this regard, and, with this chapter, I propose – although Jaan might only reluctantly accept this – for it to become fundamental reading within creativity research as well. This development is under way.

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# The Carnavalesque Pedagogy: Jaan as a Pedagogist



Kyoko Murakami

## 1 Introduction

Many senior colleague readers may remember Jaan’s contribution to the development of cultural psychology in the 1990s, especially, his remarkable effort to bridge cultural psychology with psychological anthropology and cultural anthropology. It was an exciting period in my opinion, when cultural psychology made a radical departure from cross-cultural psychology. Cultural psychology views culture not as a cause, but as a vital constituent of human psychological functioning. ‘Culture—in terms of semiotic mediators and meaningful action patterns—is the inherent core of human psychological functions, rather than an external causal entity that has “effects” on human emotion, cognition, and behavior’ (Valsiner, 2009, p. 5). This view of culture is consistently reflected in many of Jaan’s works in that period, such as *Understanding Vygotsky* (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) and *Culture and Human Development* (Valsiner, 2000), and his launching of the ground-breaking journal, *Culture and Psychology* (1995). The journal created an oasis for those scholars battling with the mainstream forces of behavioural and cognitive psychology, a burgeoning forum and space for contested debates and a sanctuary for young and emerging talents, who aspired to produce new ideas in psychology via cultural psychology. The journal has created an epistemic community, where scholars around the world and across disciplines were able to exchange intellectual ideas, interrogate the concept of culture and promote debates around the unresolved issue of the foundational question embedded in the journal: ‘how can science conceptualize the

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Festschrift: Essay in Honour of Professor Jaan Valsiner

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role of culture in the reality of the psychological functioning of human beings, in the context of their social lives, and in the development of their personal life courses?’ (1995, p. 6).

Here, I turn my gaze to Jaan as a teacher. This aspect is not well-articulated nor published by his colleagues and students. Hardly anybody speaks of how crafted and a natural-born teacher Jaan is, equipped with an excellent art of elicitation (Vermersch, 1994) and dialogic pedagogy (Skidmore & Murakami, 2016). I, as a then graduate student, had the privilege to take part in his graduate seminars in those early years (1995–1996) at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA, and observed his teaching and interactions with his students (myself included). Some years later, I moved to the UK as a PhD student. He was a visiting professor at the University of Cambridge in the summer of 2003/2004. I witnessed the very unique style of his teaching with an art of elicitation. Further on, along with my Bath colleagues at the Centre for Sociocultural and Activity Research, the University of Bath, I had the good fortune to invite him as the David Parkin visiting professor. He then was based in Clark (only nominally, as he globetrots all the time). For that 1 year, he frequently travelled across the Atlantic between Bath—via other European cities—and Worcester, MA, his then home university, Clark University.

My path has further crossed his many times since those days of North Carolina and the UK. Not so long ago, Jaan made another move to Aalborg University in Denmark, where he was appointed as the Niels Bohr Professor of Cultural Psychology in the Niels Bohr Centre for Cultural Psychology. And coincidentally, a few years after he had set up his new home in Denmark, I was appointed to the University of Copenhagen. I was again very fortunate in being able to attend his famous Kitchen Seminars (although, in AAU, it was held in a seminar room). He is a born traveller and has never been complacent with staying in one place, literally as well as metaphorically; he is an itinerate of intellectual ideas and thoughts.

## 2 Jaan as a Pedagogist<sup>1</sup>

Many readers may be puzzled by this heading, if not bothered by it. I use this term with admiration and respect to Jaan’s pedagogical practice, which I believe is the most underrated aspect of Jaan as a cultural psychologist. In my opinion, his teaching is underpinned by Bakhtin, in what might be called the carnivalesque pedagogy. It is carnivalesque as it brings about an inversion of the normative through an alternative world, where the rich may become poor and vice versa. It is a concept that encourages radicalism and dissent. The classic definition of the carnivalesque appears in Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*:

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<sup>1</sup>I use this term for its double meaning: (1) a person who studies theories of education and (2) a teacher.

Because of their obvious sensuous of character and their strong element of play, carnival images strongly resemble certain artistic forms, namely the spectacle. In turn, medieval spectacles often tended toward carnival folk culture, the culture of the marketplace, and to a certain extent became one of its components. But the basic carnival nucleus...belongs to...the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play. In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. (Bakhtin, 1984 [1968], p. 7)

In parallel to the medieval carnival blurring of the two, actors and spectators, the carnivalesque pedagogy brings teachers and students together, as equal participants in the carnival, i.e. the learning/teaching activity. Jaan carefully designs, organises and conducts his carnival. He plans his student seminars in a space away from the normal university teaching rooms as much as possible. Often arranging student seminars in the unusual place of a kitchen, his seminars are thus rightly called the Kitchen Seminar. As the David Parkin Professor at the University of Bath, he invited CSAT research students into the living room of his apartment on campus. All of Jaan's seminars with students during his visits to the University of Bath were conducted this way, thus earning the seminars the name Livingroom Seminar. This reminds me of the work of Kris Gutiérrez who emphasised in collective Third Space and sociocritical literacy (2008). The creation of a collective Third Space can be viewed as a particular kind of zone of proximal development (Gutiérrez, 2008).

What is interesting was Jaan's clever and impromptu design of a particular social environment of development. In a collective Third Space, in this case, the living room, students began to reconceive who they were and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond. Even though the seminar is technically on campus, the room and its arrangement with non-teaching-type furniture, a soft, fabric sofa and a coffee table in the middle, instead of cold, hard-surface seats and colourless desks of lecture rooms, with warmly lit floor lamps and the glimpse of a kitchen from the room, we come to see this presented to us with a different communicative demand for action. Students were made to feel they were in a non-academic, everyday space, the living room, far from intense, argumentative, competitive debates (well, the family living room can be a very hostile space sometimes, but anyway...). They were made to feel welcome to his living room and engaged themselves in unthreatening chats about their research. I observed that the students gradually became relaxed and at ease with the people, the space and the activity for which they were there. Jaan offered tea or coffee and an array of snacks and sweets which he bought from a campus store. He was so pleased to find some of his favourite Asian snacks in the campus shop (the university accommodates a huge Chinese student population and so the shop also stocks snacks and sweets with Asian flavours). Everything the research students experienced was everyday, yet unusual at the same time. As they started to chitchat whilst sipping warm cups of tea and munching Asian snacks, the students began to unwind and speak with their voice.

After the small talk, during which everyone settled into the Third Space, the research talk began seamlessly. Without any formal, declarative announcement of the beginning (and the ending) of the seminar, we just talked. There were no PowerPoint slides spelling out the outline and aim of the session. We just talked

quite gently and engaged in free-spirited, unstructured, rambling conversations with Jaan. The supervisors of the research students were not present, as he limited his carnival to the research students. The carnival was safe and well protected from authoritative figures such as the students' supervisors and the research centre director. By changing the seminar space from the university to something that is not, students were made to feel they were able to think freely crossing the stifling disciplinary boundaries and norms of the academic traditions. Jaan has a way with words; he brilliantly elicited the students' otherwise hidden and locked up ideas and gut feelings toward authoritative knowledge. The students were taught not only in a formal learning environment in the usual university lectures and training and research supervision meeting with their supervisors but also by participating in a range of life practices using the carnivalesque pedagogy that Jaan practices with the Third Space and his art of elicitation.

### 3 Carnavalesque Pedagogy

Jaan's graduate seminars and Kitchen (and Livingroom) Seminars for research students and young researchers provided an opportunity to create a complex, multi-textual environment in which the course reading represented a pastiche of alternative, unofficial texts, blended with comments from us. These interacted with the official texts to form critical parodies, exposing the real life of the Soviet Union (the USA or Denmark—wherever he was based), often from an Estonian standpoint—what I call the trickster position. Jan, as a trickster, developed a spirit of the irrelevant and the comic in the ongoing otherwise very tense, stifling discussions that students, or the power-less people, often see in academic seminars. Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque was our touchstone, which can be applied to analysing the seminar discourse, where students, aspiring to put their stamp on the force of cultural psychology, created critical dialogues on the authoritative knowledge about behavioural and cognitive psychology, or psychology as a whole.

In Jaan's seminars, irrespective of being for academic credits or for non-credit seminars like the Kitchen or Livingroom, there are no deliberate attempts for any participant to create any set meaning or presume to depict one 'real' version of cultural psychology. Rather, the seminar discussions engage us, the students, in the critical thinking process, to activate our own responses to a complex of utterances, much in the spirit of a response-centred critical approach to building and advancing theory. This strategy, with its emphasis on 'taboo' topics and its use of dramatic surprise and of pure 'entertainment' (I mean by enjoying intellectual ideas as entertainment) values (e.g. his distinctively comical gestures, change of prosody in his sotto voce twittering manner of speech and removal of institutional features in seminar settings), was useful in capturing and retaining the students' attention, enthusiasm and passion for the ideas and topics at hand. His student seminars offered a valuable opportunity for students to develop academic dialogue skills without being

intimidated in the otherwise monologic, authoritative academic university learning context.

Jaan's seminars are the carnival, representing a plurality of worlds, where diversity of perspectives converge and produce ambivalence through disruption. Bakhtin (1984b [1968]) writes that 'the carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators' (Bakhtin, 1984b, [1968] p. 7). Bakhtin (1981) refers to double-voiced discourse in which two discourses or two responses are fused into one; this might quality what Jaan used to say, a unity of opposites (Valsiner, 2016). If footlights were shone on our subversive interactions, the carnival would be destroyed, and the double-voiced aspect of our intellectual development would be lost. Double-voiced discourse occurs when diverse voices interact and struggle against each other and enter a hybrid of constructions. When official discourse and unofficial discourse are present, we develop a sense of self, as an academic, researcher or student. Bakhtin argues, 'it was, so to speak, the carnivalization of speech, which freed it from the gloomy seriousness of official philosophy as well as from truisms and common place ideas' (1984b [1968], p. 426). These perspectives relate to Jaan supporting student seminar participants with the breaking up of the hierarchical world to construct new concepts and revise old words, meanings and ideas in their learning of cultural psychology. The carnivalesque subversions in Jaan's seminars are not a spectacle simply to be seen by people. We, the students, belong to the carnival; we actively live, think and debate in it.

The carnival in Jaan's seminars is organised around laughter and humour. Jaan is charming when he interacts with his students, provocatively making us laugh with his humour and self-deprecating jokes and caricatures. Carnavalesque laughter is directed at everyone and is 'directed towards something higher – towards a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders' (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 127). When students criticise psychology's orthodoxy and mainstream traditions such as cognitive and behavioural psychology, they dialogically engage with comic spectacle and shared merriment, which creates solidarity against the upholders of the academic authoritative knowledge. '[I]n this plane (plane of laughter) one can disrespectfully walk around whole objects; therefore, the back and rear portions of an object (and also its innards, not normally accessible for viewing) assume a special importance' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 23). Jaan's humour is the language of the carnival with the 'power to divide, unite and undermine the normative order, where laughter does not reproduce fear but conveys feelings of strength' (Bakhtin, 1984a, p. 95). I have felt a strong sense of solidarity or Community of Practice kind of transformation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where students at the peripheral are moved to the core membership in the interactions taking place in the seminars. He seems to use carnivalesque laughter, which can vividly be felt as an escape from the official ways of academic thinking, as essentially related to freedom, amusement and a form of renewal.

There are many reasons to identify Jaan's seminars with the carnival. Firstly, drama, stories and playfulness all take place in a time cut off from reality and in a Third Space open for us, the students, to feel, act and think differently from everyday life. In university classrooms in the USA in the late 1990s (and even now,

perhaps), the teacher's authoritarian role, hierarchy systems and official knowledge prevailed. Jaan often pretended to be someone else, who is conceivably grotesque and transgressive—of course, in a Bakhtinian sense. This generated whimsical fun, curiosity and excitement among seminar students. The magic of Jaan's pretending can be further enhanced through engaging the students in conversation as equal partners and co-creators of knowledge. This absence of boundary between Jaan, the teacher and us, the students, turns the seminar room, in Bakhtin's words, into 'a pageant without footlights' (1984a, p. 122). It is everybody's participation in this boundless pageant that makes possible both power reversal and dialogic meaning-making.

#### 4 Decrowning-Crowning

Drawing on the notions of the carnival fool or the king decrowning-crowning, I've observed the interplay between Jaan's clever, purposeful disguise in his seminars, which has brought about the reversal of hierarchies and controls of the everyday university lectures and seminars. The practice of the carnivalesque classroom can be compared to the crowning-decrowning of the carnival agents. In the mediaeval carnival, the mock crowning and decrowning of the carnival king was a crucial and primary ritual. The mock crowning and decrowning ritual allowed students to be enthroned as the carnival king or queen, and the low clergy to pretend they were bishops, to conduct a mock mass. Bakhtin (1984a) argues that the ritual expresses the carnival spirit of reversing all the hierarchical structures, meanings and truths. Whereas the power of the church or state, or, in this case, academia and orthodox psychology, did not disappear, it was disguised through the folly performed by the agents. This is regarded as carnivalistic *mésalliances* of folly and wisdom. Jaan may look foolish in pretending to be someone else, but he actually uses wise and skilful instruction in the process of seminars. The ultimate purpose of crowning the students is to empower them to become active participants and co-creators of new psychological knowledge and hence to prompt their interpretation, choice and ownership of the knowledge.

In setting up activities to deepen and extend the students' learning and experience of co-production of psychological knowledge, Jaan challenges, supports, exploits tension and shapes the students' experience from within the seminar space. The students were empowered and think and act transgressively in the safe, low-key seminar space he meticulously creates and maintains. When it comes to his mannerism, he delicately and wisely applied his gestures, prosody, props (e.g. a pen in his hand) and kinetics to enliven the concepts, ideas, perspectives and often the authors of papers. This disguise as a fool is imaginative and yet true-to-life enough to strip away the serious and authoritarian image as a teacher to see him in the light of a person, who is endearing, charmingly witty and piercingly analytical (on such occasions, Jaan uses unique characteristics and jokes about Estonians vs. Russians). Together with his dramaturgy skills of communication, Jaan's disguise as a fool

further transgressed the orders, norms and atmosphere of learning and teaching in the everyday university classroom and seminar rooms. Although these transgressions mainly focused on the bodily, spatial and sensational aspects of carnivalesque teaching and learning, they stretched the students' imaginations and thinking and engaged them in challenging the ideas at hand.

The power of Jaan as a teacher is never simply and totally shifted to the students but is tacitly shared with them. This alliance between him and his students is very special and therefore powerful. This seems to happen when Jaan is exploring something new as he always is. I come to realise this only in the hindsight after he has published a new article or a book to cultivate a pasture a new. His power- and knowledge-sharing with students or the unique alliance serves a creative ground for continuous innovation.

To conclude, I have illustrated an underrated aspect of Jaan as a pedagogist and as a brilliant practitioner of the carnivalesque pedagogy. I am very grateful to have been part of this pedagogic process, albeit intermittently. Wherever he is in the world, Jaan gives his time unsparingly to students, earnestly listening to them and thinking *with* the students, in order to nurture their ideas and help develop their confidence and place in academia. We, as Jaan's students, have and will always cherish a privileged dialogic engagement. The beautiful memory of his carnivalesque pedagogy continues to grow in us.

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# Overcoming the Binary Logic in Biculturalism



Elke Murdock 

## 1 Introduction: Some Context

What does it mean to be bicultural? Biculturalism – the very term includes the bi, a simple two – suggesting a binary logic. The second component, culture, is of course very complex. Superficially, the term biculturalism suggests a coming together or at least the co-existence of two cultures. Yet, what does it mean to be bicultural? This simple short question has guided my research over recent years, and I am still searching for an answer. However, Jaan’s ideas and encouragements have helped to move somewhat closer to an understanding, and I will elaborate on this journey towards a better insight in this short paper.

This journey started when I had the chance, as a young student, to complete my diploma thesis on the topic of *Kulturelle Identität - eine Konzeptanalyse im interdisziplinären Raum*<sup>1</sup> (Rumpel, 1990) under the tutorship of Dr. B. Krewer and Prof. L. H. Eckensberger at the Saarland University, Saarbrücken. As elaborated elsewhere (Murdock, 2018), the Saarland University and the Research Institute Sozialpsychologische Forschungsstelle für Entwicklungsplanung, founded by Prof. E. E. Boesch, were a hub for (cross-)cultural psychological research – attracting visiting scholars from around the world. Fruitful collaborations took place, and in 1997, Jaan edited a *Culture and Psychology* special issue on *The Saarbrücken Tradition in Cultural Psychology, and its Legacy* (Valsiner, 1997). Founder of the Saarbrücken tradition is E. E. Boesch who developed the symbolic action theory (Boesch, 1980).

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<sup>1</sup>Cultural Identity. An analysis of this concept from an interdisciplinary perspective.

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When the special issue came out, I had long moved away and pursued a non-academic professional career. Today, I live in Luxembourg. We are a family of four, with four different passports (eight in total) – each of us holding dual nationalities, but only two family members have the same combination of passports. In Luxembourg, this is not uncommon. With a foreign population percentage of 47.4% (Statec, 2020), three official national languages, and English and Portuguese widely spoken, Luxembourg is a fascinating small country to live in – especially for someone with an interest in cultural identity processes (Murdock, 2017). Sparked on by personal experience and the socio-cultural context of Luxembourg, I was pleased to get a chance to return to academia to research the differential experiences of culture contact at the University of Luxembourg under the supervision of Prof. D. Ferring. Dieter Ferring and Jaan had developed a very productive and rewarding relationship and friendship, culminating in book projects, such as *Human Development in the Life Course: Melodies of Living* (Zittoun et al., 2013), inspirational occasional seminars, and workshops. Jaan has thus been a regular visitor to Luxembourg – and together with my colleagues Thomas Boll and Isabelle Albert, we have established the *Annual Cultural Psychology Summer School* at the University of Luxembourg. Each edition has a different theme, but every edition benefits from Jaan’s insightful analysis, his depth and richness of analysis, and in particular his ability to make connections - drawing from a wide range of disciplines and different cultural contexts and explaining very complex ideas in the most comprehensible way. During our first Summer School in 2018 on the theme of *Cultural Psychology: From Theory to Practice*, I had presented my thoughts on bicultural identity processes based on existing theories on biculturalism. Jaan and Pina Marsico encouraged me to think about biculturalism in a different way. I will first outline some models of biculturalism I had studied before reaching the turning point during the summer school and will then present Jaan’s ideas which helped to overcome the binary logic.

## 2 Frameworks Within the Confines of Dualism

### *Older Models of Second Culture Acquisition*

In 1928, Robert E. Park observes that the “cake of custom” is broken as a consequence of migration: “Energies that were formerly controlled by custom and tradition are released. The individual is free for new adventures, but he is more or less without direction and control” (p. 887). Park (1928) coins the term “marginal man” for persons on the margin of two cultures. Also, Stonequist (1935) elaborates on the problem of the marginal man. The early writers recognize the impact of the migration experience and focus on the struggles within the individual. Only in the second half of the twentieth century, researchers started to move away from the deficit-oriented perspective. Yet, common to the early models is the assumption of a linear model of second culture acquisition.

A step change is initiated by LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton (1993) as they challenge this linear model of second culture acquisition and show alternatives to this assumption. Focusing on process variables associated with models of second culture acquisition these authors introduce the additive, non-hierarchical alternation model. Based on a literature review on the psychological impact of biculturalism, the authors identified five different models of second culture acquisition, namely assimilation, acculturation, fusion, multiculturalism and alternation. These modes differ regarding assumptions about hierarchy and directionality. The assimilation model assumes an ongoing process of absorption into the culture that is perceived as dominant or more desirable. Acculturation, as defined by the authors, is similar to assimilation as both models assume a unidirectional and hierarchical relationship between two cultures and desire the acquisition of the majority culture. While the assimilation model assumes that full membership status in the majority culture can eventually be attained, identification as minority culture member persists under the acculturation model, despite becoming a competent participant in the majority culture. As the name suggests, the fusion model suggests that cultures will fuse together forming a new culture. The multicultural model promotes a pluralistic approach to understanding the relationship between two or more cultures – and here the authors also quote Berry and colleagues, who have of course formulated strategies for cultural relations in culturally plural societies (Berry, 1980, 1984, 1986; Berry et al., 1989). At the level of individuals and ethnocultural groups, these can hold a relative preference for maintaining their own heritage culture and identity or having contact with and participating in the larger society. The position ranging from a positive to negative orientation regarding maintenance of heritage culture and identity and relationships sought among the larger society results in four options: assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration. Under the integration approach, an individual or ethnic group values the maintenance of their heritage culture while also engaging in the activities of the larger society. Yet, as LaFromboise et al. (1993) point out, integration defined in this way assumes that the cultures are tied together within a single social structure. In contrast, their alternation model includes relationships that do not necessarily evolve within a larger multicultural framework, and importantly, equal status is assigned to two cultures. The alternation model is an additive model of second culture acquisition, and the first put forward assuming a non-hierarchical, bidirectional relationship between two cultures. “The alternation model postulates that an individual can choose the degree and manner to which her or she will affiliate with either the second culture or the second culture of his or her culture of origin” (LaFromboise et al., 1993, p. 400). Building on the alternation model, LaFromboise et al. (1993) shift the focus onto identifying factors allowing effective functioning of individuals in dual cultures and develop the construct of bicultural competence.

Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997) explored different ways of maintaining a relationship with two cultures. These include *fusion*, where two cultures completely merge to form something new, *blending*, where an individual locates herself at the intersection of two cultures or an *alternating* bicultural, moving between two cultures.. These different forms of being bicultural are graphically presented in Fig. 1.

### Newer Models of Second Culture Acquisition

Newer models use different labels to describe these processes. West et al. (2017), for example, introduce the term hybrid to describe the merger of the cultures forming something new. Yampolsky et al. (2013) use the term compartmentalization for those who maintain separate identities within themselves and integration for those who link their cultural identities. These terms were added into Fig. 1. Newer models on biculturalism also criticize that earlier models confound identity and behavioral markers. Labels such as “fused” or “blended” refer to identity related aspects, whereas “alternating” refers to the behavioral domain – that is, the ability to engage in cultural frame switching (CFS).

Benet-Martínez et al. (2002) suggest that biculturals, who they define as individuals “that have experienced and internalized more than on culture” (p. 493), differ in their subjective perception of the tensions between mainstream and ethnic cultures. They introduce *bicultural identity integration (BII)* as individual difference variable that moderates the cultural frame switching process. In a series of priming studies, the authors can show that individual differences in BII indeed affect how cultural knowledge is used to interpret social events. Benet-Martínez and

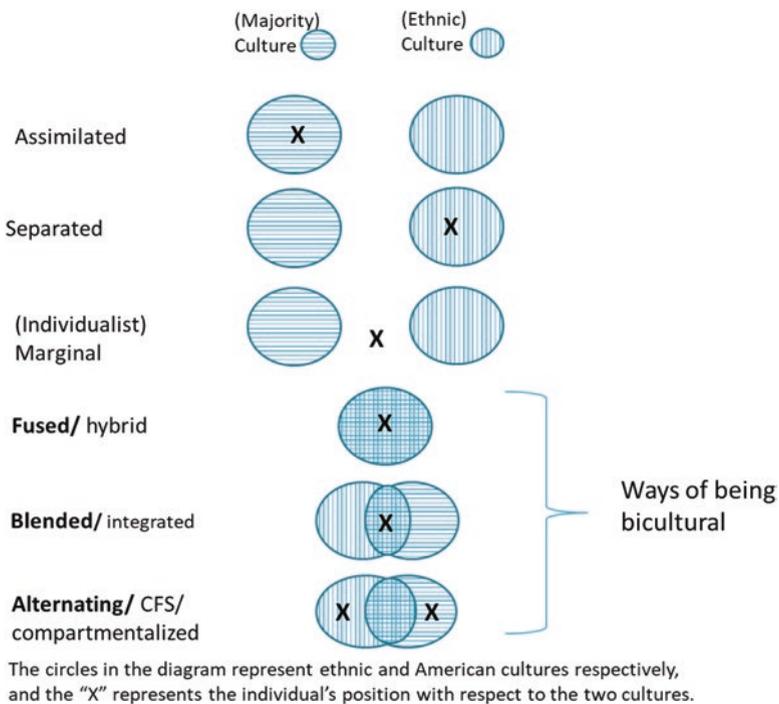


Fig. 1 Ways of being bicultural (Adapted from Phinney and Navarro (1997, p. 6))

Haritatos (2005) show that BII encompasses separate constructs, namely, perceptions of distance (versus overlap) and perceptions of conflict (versus harmony), towards the cultural orientations. They recognize the complex negotiation processes between cultures and show different behavioral outcomes – but the process of internalization remains unexplained. In a later contribution to the *Handbook of Personality and Social Psychology* (Benet-Martínez, 2012), the prefix is changed to *multicultural*, and Benet-Martínez writes that there is no commonly agreed psychological definition of multiculturalism. She reiterates the definition of biculturalism of having been exposed to and having internalized two or more cultures. In reference to LaFromboise et al. (1993), she adds that multicultural individuals are those “who display multicultural *competence*,<sup>2</sup> i.e., display cultural behaviors such as language use, choice of friends, media preferences, value systems, that are representative of two or more cultures” (Benet-Martínez, 2012, p. 625). Furthermore, she suggests that multicultural individuals are also those whose self-label in such a way (e.g., “I am multicultural”) or group self-categorize in a way that reflects their cultural pluralism (e.g., “I am American” and “I am Chinese”; “I am Chinese-American”).

These definitions stay at the descriptive level and still follow a binary logic – even if the possibility of the influence of more than two cultures is recognized. The self-labelling *process* remains unexplained. A more recent theory, the *Transformative Theory of Biculturalism* (West et al., 2017), at least acknowledges that the process of negotiation transforms the experience of culture. To explain this transformation, these authors employ the analogy of baking a cake: certain ingredients, combined in the right order, produce a cake – the transformative process of combining the ingredients producing the end result – a cake. Many questions remain unanswered – including whose recipe one follows, the specificity of the ingredients, different preferences regarding the end result, and the assumption that everyone knows what a cake is, to name but a few.

My own thoughts about biculturalism had also been encapsulated by the circles shown in Fig. 1. I had mused about the size of the overlap between the circles, the size of each circle (equal or different?), whether two circles amount to 100% or represent in fact a doubling of resources, and so on. Even though I took more and more factors into consideration – I stayed within the confines of the binary logic and the solid borders of the circles – reflecting an understanding of culture as container. Essentially, I was stuck in a box.

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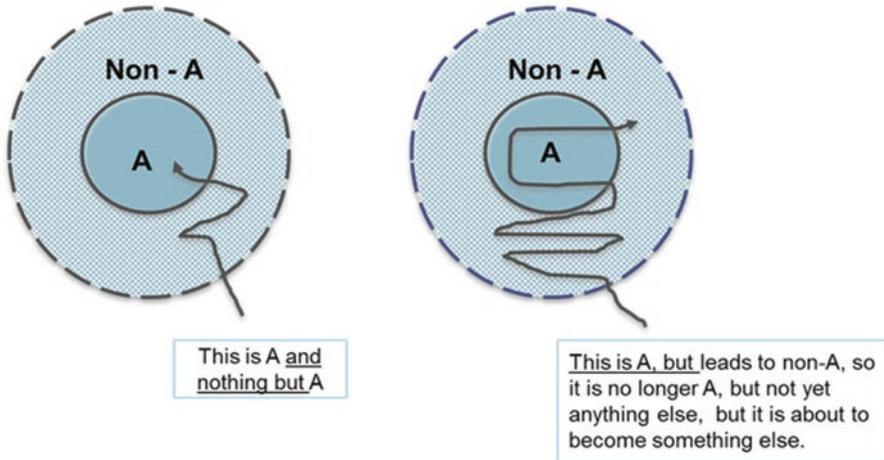
<sup>2</sup>In a preprint version, competence was italicized by the author – however, italics were removed in the post-print version of the chapter.

### 3 Leaving the Confines of the Circle

The starting point for a different approach was understanding of culture as semiotically mediated, as a process of *relating* – as Jaan elaborates in many of his writings. Culture is not understood as a “container” where a person “belongs” to a culture or is situated “in” a culture which in turn is defined by a rigid boundary. Instead, culture is understood as a process of relating, where the culture is in the individual and lived through the other. Culture is then not transmitted, but co-constructed. As Valsiner (2014) explains: “Culture is reconstructed in new forms between generations and cohorts of persons of the same age through a process of bi-directional communicative acts” (p. 38). This is a powerful insight. First of all, we are not “members of a culture,” but culture in terms of semiosis is part of our psyche, and this in turn is lived through the other. Already C. H. Cooley (1902) had employed the analogy of the looking-glass self, recognizing the social relatedness of individuals (cited in Frey, 1983). We see ourselves in the reflection of the other. Breakwell (1986, p. 13) quotes Cooley: “Self and Society are twinborn ... and the notion of a separate and independent self is an illusion.” Thus, Cooley understood that exclusive separation, a strict separation between the self and the outside world, is not feasible. Non-separation has been introduced as a step towards combating dualism in the person-environment mutuality (Abbey, 2007). Person and environment are assumed to be without a priori separation – erasing the separation from which they arise. An alternative way forward, however, is to think in terms of *inclusive separation* – which assumes a triadic logic and permeability of borders. A boundary is perceived as membrane – simultaneously separating and uniting connecting parts of a whole (Valsiner, 1998, 2014, 2017).

Before discussing the power of the triad, I want to briefly mention another idea Jaan introduced me to, namely, abductive logic – which is also based on the permeability of borders (Valsiner, 2012). The abductive class membership illustration is also an example for Jaan’s simple drawings and squiggly lines – which illustrate a complex thought (Fig. 2).

The permeability of a border will determine whether a category is fixed and an endpoint or a stepping stone for further inquiry. The crucial point is whether category A is fixed or open to further investigation beyond this category. If A is A and Non-A is Non-A – nothing new can emerge. Yet with the smallest opening, some permeability, the squiggly line, weaving in and out, illustrates the “in-between” state of no longer being A, but not yet being Non-A. Abductive class membership thus releases ideas. Underlying is an understanding that boundaries function as membranes – they are permeable and the domains where psychological processes take place. The permeability of a border allows for ideas to be formed. A boundary no longer separates. On the contrary – boundaries exist as structures that connect the separated parts by providing the arena for their relationship. Valsiner (2007) quotes the Igbo Proverb “A boundary is not the point where something stops... A boundary is the point from where something begins to be present” (p. 221).



**Fig. 2** Illustration of usual and abductive class membership determination. (Based on Valsiner (2012, p. 7))

As he elaborates further – such boundaries are generated by co-genetic logic – and here the power of the triad is introduced. Dualities don't provide the space for development and change – instead there are repetitive cycles: Stimulus - Response. No novelty can emerge from within the system. To understand biculturalism, we need to overcome the binary logic of Culture 1 versus/and Culture 2. They are not opposites but co-define each other. Tateo (2016) succinctly explains the power of the triad. Examples of triads include inside – outside and boundary or finite region-infinite region and boundary. Removing one of the elements of the triad makes the other disappear or become indistinguishable. In strictly logical terms, the negation of a concept is a non-concept. Yet, what is important to note is that concept *A* may be a closed set whose limits are defined by the distinction – while the negation *non-A* is an open set. Where there is a national identity – there must be a non-national identity, yet the open set is an infinite field of possibilities which allows the emergence of new meaning. As Tateo (2016) writes ... “the open set non-NATIONAL IDENTITY<sup>3</sup> includes an infinite number of potential instances (e.g. quasi-national, not-yet national, antinational, foreigner, enemy, etc.” (p. 439). The closed set *A* and the open set *non-A* dynamically co-define each other and include a more or less large temporal and symbolic buffer zone that establishes at the same time the rules for separation and the rules for permeable borders between *A* and *non-A*. Important is the reference to zones – rather than demarcation lines. A zone can dynamically expand or constrict over time (Tateo, 2016). Within this expanding and constricting buffer zone, conceptual links among competing perspectives can be forged – and the organizing principle is dynamic tension (Marsico & Tateo, 2017). As these authors explain, tension is a positive force – dynamic tension ensures both flexibility and

<sup>3</sup>Capitalization by the author.

stability over time. “Such fields of tension emerge as a result of positioning and counter-positioning processes in the arena of the power-laden society where a distinctive cultural value system, promoted by societal institutions and historical traditions, provide the Self with opportunities and constraints for development” (Marsico & Tateo, 2017, p. 537). The authors have coined the term *tensegrity* (tensional integrity) to describe this process. Understanding biculturalism as a self-stabilizing tensegrity network, viewing tension as a positive force was a Eureka moment during the cultural summer school of 2018.

The conceptual framework of *inclusive separation* (Valsiner, 1998) is a further building block helping to overcome the binary logic. This framework does not assume separate, independent units but a triadic unit (A, non-A, plus the boundary) as already elaborated above. This framework allows for theorizing about the person-environment relation in dualism-free ways (Abbey, 2007). “The framework of inclusive separation supports the *duality* of person-environment relations, where the person and environment—though distinct—are interdependent. The person does not function without the environment, and the environment requires the person as part of its composition: each *exists through processes of relating with the other*” (Abbey, 2007, p. 15, italics in the original). And here I have come full circle, as I started my deliberations about leaving the circle by pointing out that the starting point for departure was the realization that culture is about relating. All human life is mediated by signs (Valsiner et al., 2017).

I have yet to put my thoughts regarding *what it means to be bicultural* on paper. However, Jaan’s ideas have helped me to leave the confines of the circles – as depicted in Fig. 1. He and his close collaborators have equipped me with the foundation upon which to build a new theoretical framework for understanding biculturalism. The journey continues. Thank you.

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# The Sense of Belonging in the Context of Migration: Meanings and Developmental Trajectories



Isabelle Albert and Stephanie Barros

## 1 Introduction

What does it mean to belong? And what makes us feel belonging? Most of us know this feeling of security, of being in “one’s” place. Each of us can somehow relate to the term. Yet, its definition is not trivial. Belonging is not simply the opposite of feeling socially excluded. It is closely linked to further concepts, such as identification, connectedness, attachment, feeling “to be at home,” or feeling “to fit in” (Halse, 2018). The need to belong is universal, and a widely used definition refers to it as the need for meaningful, not conflict-laden, relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However, it cannot be taken for granted. There are moments in life in which one might have the feeling not to belong, not being “part of the club,” or of being lost. Migration is such a rupture (Zittoun & Valsiner, 2016), an experience that can shake up old life patterns and disturb our system of established bonds and certainties (Barros et al., 2018). In this situation, individuals are asked to adapt to their new surroundings in order to find a new equilibrium between old and new belongings (Marsico & Tateo, 2017).

Belonging is a multifaceted concept that can refer to different entities and points of reference. Social belonging might refer to social units or groups sharing specific characteristics (Halse, 2018); cultural belonging might refer to aspects such as common values, practices, and customs or language; and spatial belonging refers to a place (Antonsich, 2010), which can also be symbolic or imaginative (see also Taylor, 2009). Belonging can thereby refer to the country of residence or different groups living in there as well as to transnational or global networks (see also Barros & Albert, 2020).

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Combining social and spatial aspects of belonging, Juang et al. (2018) have recently proposed the notion of “connection to place” as an extension of attachment theory. Accordingly, building up close social ties and geographical bonds that make them feel safe and comfortable in the receiving context is essential for immigrants.

Interestingly, a popular exercise in meditation and stress prevention is to imagine a “safe” place (Giacobbi et al., 2017). A sense of belonging or feeling “home” could thus be a feeling inside the person that can also be carried into other contexts. Here, the link to attachment theory becomes once more visible. In early childhood, the safe base allows for exploration, and if there are difficulties, the child returns to the attachment figure as a safe haven (Ainsworth, 1964; Bowlby, 1969). Attachment patterns are later generalized in adulthood – a feeling of security becomes the basis to act autonomously and to explore the world on a larger range (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

## 2 What We Know So Far: Describing and Negotiating Different Cultural Belongings

Previous research on acculturation highlighted several models that described the extent to which values and practices of the culture of origin are maintained and those of the receiving culture are taken over (Berry, 2017; see also Redfield et al., 1936), and theories of bicultural identity have gone a step further by focusing on how individuals might reconcile their different cultural belongings (e.g., Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997; West et al., 2017). Although the sense of belonging is an inherent aspect in the just-described models, it has received less attention as a concept on its own in acculturation and bicultural identity research (Murdock, this volume). Also, these theories have not provided explanations for underlying processes of how people actually develop a sense of belonging when migrating (Gamsakhurdia, 2019).

The recently introduced concept of proculturation (Gamsakhurdia, 2019) can help to bridge this gap. Indeed, the term of proculturation is proposed “in order to reflect individuals’ substantial and idiosyncratic experiences in a foreign environment” (p. 165). When individuals migrate, they encounter new places and situations in an unfamiliar environment, and they have to make sense of these new experiences. In a process of semiotic mediation, unfamiliar signs are interpreted with available knowledge, and this creates again new signs, i.e. subjectively constructed and interpersonally shared representations that connect the inner and outer world of a person (Valsiner, 2000, 2001). New surroundings, practices, norms, and habits in the receiving society that might feel strange and unknown at first will become familiar after a while and might even become a certainty. Thereby, each proculturnative experience leaves an imprint on the person (Gamsakhurdia, 2018), and a person’s imaginative processes with regard to alternative developmental lines will serve to evaluate their actual life against dismissed opportunities.

The trajectory equifinality model (TEM; Sato et al., 2014) can be used to describe different life trajectories by drawing on the basic terms of bifurcation point (BFP), equifinality point (EFP), and trajectory (T). People are seen here as active agents, building up their life courses by making choices within irreversible time. Equifinality describes the notion that the same state may be reached from different starting points and through different pathways. Equifinality points (EFP) refer then to a certain state that might have been joined via different trajectories. When looking at narratives of life courses, different bifurcation points (BFP) can be identified, i.e. moments in life when different opportunities were present and a certain direction was taken. Once the EFP reached, people might look back and consider the “what ifs”: What could have been if they had chosen another pathway at a specific bifurcation point (BFP)? What would have been different on the way to the same equifinality point? They might use these comparisons in order to evaluate their actual state (EFP) they have reached. Regarding the exposed elements, TEM seems suitable to focus on life trajectories of migrants and their process of creating a sense of belonging in their new living space.

### 3 How TEM Can be Applied in Migration Research

The aim of the present contribution is to provide an example for how TEM may be applied in migration research by analyzing (1) how a sense of belonging is referred to by migrants of first and second generation and (2) how the process of building up a feeling of home and belonging is being developed in the context of migration. Thereby, we will take a life-span perspective, considering the just-described concept of proculturation (Gamsakhurdia, 2018) as well as the trajectory equifinality approach (TEA; Sato et al., 2014).

In a cultural psychology perspective of semiotic mediation, we focus on the subjective experience of present, past, and future self, taking into account also possible and actual selves as well as the view of others (Valsiner, 2014).

To this aim, we will draw on a single case from the IRMA project on Intergenerational Relations in the light of Migration and Ageing, an FNR-funded project which we have carried out together from 2013 to 2017<sup>1</sup> at the University of Luxembourg with Dieter Ferring as supervisor and Jaan Valsiner as mentor. The IRMA study has focused in particular on identity constructions and intergenerational family relations of first and second generation of Portuguese and Luxembourgish families living in Luxembourg. The starting point of the IRMA

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<sup>1</sup>IRMA – “Intergenerational Relations in the light of Migration and Ageing,” FNR 2013–2017: C12/SC/4009630/IRMA/Albert – PI: Dr. Isabelle Albert; Project Collaborator: Dr. Stephanie Barros; Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Dieter Ferring; Mentor: Prof. Dr. Jaan Valsiner. We are grateful for the invaluable support of our supervisor and our mentor in this project. We further thank very dearly our participants for having shared their experiences with us as well as our student assistants who supported us in data collection.

project was the fact that a large proportion of Portuguese first-generation migrants who came to Luxembourg in the 1970s are now close to retirement age (Albert et al., 2016; Statec, 2020). Altogether  $N = 506$  participants from three subgroups (LU natives, PT migrants in Luxembourg, and PT natives in Portugal) filled out standardized questionnaires. Furthermore,  $n = 20$  parent-child pairs (10 of each subsample in Luxembourg) were invited to interviews to discuss about topics such as migration, multiculturalism in Luxembourg, and the intergenerational transmission of traditions and values within families (for further details, please refer to Albert et al., 2016; Bichler et al., 2020; Barros et al., 2018; Barros & Albert, 2020). A semi-structured interview guideline was used. Interviews were audio- and video-recorded and lasted between 1 and 2 hours.

## 4 The Selected Case

In the following, we are going to describe one case in more detail as an illustrative example for the purpose of the present chapter. Our selected case refers to a mother-adult child dyad of Portuguese origin (Francisca-Patricia).<sup>2</sup> This case was selected as it provides a detailed narrative on how both the mother and her daughter experienced their process of integration in Luxembourg from the arrival to the current date. The mother, Francisca, is in her 60s and has been living in Luxembourg for 40 years. She is married and has three adult children who grew up in Luxembourg. The daughter came to Luxembourg together with her family when she was 7. While Francisca was working in the low-skilled service sector before retirement, her daughter, Patricia, who is now in her 40s, has a professional degree and works as a clerk in the health sector.

Both participants filled out a questionnaire and were interviewed in-depth by the second author of this chapter who self-defines as “Luxembourger of Portuguese descent/with Portuguese parents” (Barros, 2020). Parent and adult child were interviewed together as dyads in order to examine the intergenerational interactions, dynamics, and processes of relationship regulation.

In the questionnaire, Francisca (the mother) indicates that her expectations about her life in Luxembourg have been fulfilled completely; she indicates to be satisfied with her life as a whole; however, she does not agree that she would leave her life unchanged if she could start it all over again, and she is undecided as to whether her life is close to her ideal. Her social network is mostly Portuguese, and she lives in a predominantly Portuguese neighborhood – her point of reference seems thus to be her ethnic group; also, she spends almost half of the year in Portugal, which demonstrates her transnational orientation. However, she indicates that she has no plans to return permanently to Portugal in the future. She indicates having experienced low acculturative stress and feels that it is important to keep traditions as a migrant. She indicates to feel more Portuguese than Luxembourgish and indicates no particular identity conflict.

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<sup>2</sup>For purposes of confidentiality, aliases were used for both, mother and daughter.

Patricia, the daughter, scores high on life satisfaction in general and wouldn't like to change anything; she indicates that her identity is a mixture of both and she engages in frame-switching depending on whom she is with – Portuguese or Luxembourgish people. She points out no relevant discrimination experiences; however, she reveals having been somewhat criticized by Portuguese peers of being too Luxembourgish. She has the double nationality, with Portuguese and French as her mother tongues, while having a good mastery of Luxembourgish and German. She spends a month a year in Portugal; however, she does not want to live in Portugal in the near future, maybe though to commute after retirement. Most of her friends are Portuguese although she indicates not having any preferences for activities with particular groups.

### ***First-Generation Experiences***

Let us now have a closer look at the mother's perspective in the semi-structured interview. For the present chapter, we focus on the first part of the interview which draws on the experiences of migration of our participants and on their feelings regarding integration in Luxembourg. Here, we can apply the concept of proculturation in reference to the following dialogue when Francisca and Patricia talk about their first experience in Luxembourg:

- Francisca: *“I mean it was very ugly here, I'm frank. It was ugly and we were hungry and everything, but then I”*  
 Patricia: *“You said you thought it was weird that the roofs were all dark I”*  
 Francisca: *“All black and the lights were all yellow ()”*

As Gamsakhurdia (2019) notes, migrants are confronted with an unknown context which is full of foreign signs. The new (spatial) surrounding feels unfamiliar, and migrants are challenged to make sense of their new environment, while memories of the familiar context back home prevail:

- Patricia: *“Sure, they were used to see only red roofs, it is like this in Portugal.”*  
 Francisca: *“But here the roofs were all black, I would have taken the train and gone back to Portugal immediately.”*

Here we can see a first bifurcation point, two alternatives present – going back or stay, and she decides to stay:

- Interviewer: *“So your first experience of integration was complicated I”*  
 Francisca: *“Bad, it was very bad. I didn't leave again because I didn't have a home, I had nothing in Portugal.... So, I decided to stay.”*

The dialogue illustrates how semiotic mediation of new signs evolves by involving imagination of what could have been if another choice was made, and live

trajectories are evaluated along these alternatives (Gamsakhurdia, 2018). Thus, while it is difficult at first to adapt to the new spatial and social environment, Francisca decides to stay in Luxembourg, which she justifies by the lacking alternatives. In Portugal, the situation seems worse as she has no house of her own and has to stay with her mother-in-law. Looking back, she uses the imagination of what could have been (living interdependently with the family of her husband) to evaluate the choice she made back then (living independently in Luxembourg).

Interestingly, when asked about her view of Luxembourg today, her perception has changed completely:

*Interviewer:* “*And do you still think that about Luxembourg?*”

*Francisca:* “*No, it’s much more beautiful now!*” (laughter)

What has happened between the first time in Luxembourg and today? It becomes obvious here that the unfamiliar has become familiar over time (Gamsakhurdia, 2018). What has made the unknown and unfriendly surrounding a better place? To trace the trajectory to this equifinality point of feeling home in Luxembourg, i.e., of having adapted to Luxembourg and having developed a sense of belonging, we go back in time to the first year of the family in Luxembourg, and here we find another crucial bifurcation point. More precisely, after 1 year of living and working at a farm in poor economic conditions, the family decides to move to the city, and the economic situation changes completely:

*Francisca:* “*...after I was here, about a year... after I left the farm...I came here and started working, I started to like it here. From that moment I started to like Luxembourg. Otherwise not.*”

In the narrative, it becomes evident that their life situation during the first months in Luxembourg was extremely hard. The move within Luxembourg after some months, however, brought a significant improvement of the economic situation which included also a (social) recognition of her work being now paid adequately. This sets a turning point to her view on Luxembourg:

*Francisca:* “*Yes but I liked it a lot. After work and when I started to see my salary at the end of the month that I liked, I didn’t want to leave and I won’t.*”

The family has migrated to Luxembourg for a better life, and finally they have attained this goal:

*Francisca:* (Luxembourg provided) “*a better life. Also, thanks to work.*”

Repeatedly, Francisca highlights the fact that a future return to the country of origin is now excluded, as the aforementioned quote already highlights, although she spends much time in Portugal:

*Francisca:* “*Yeah I go there on vacation for 3-4 months, [bah] 5 it was 5 in the end but I’m not going forever.*”

A transnational orientation becomes clear in the practice of commuting, although the point of reference remains Luxembourg, even if she spends almost half of the year in Portugal. Interestingly, also in Luxembourg, she is mostly in contact with Portuguese neighbors and friends, although leading a somehow retracted life as she notes:

*Interviewer:* “But are you still more in touch with Portuguese only or not Portuguese at all?”

*Francisca:* “Yes, with the Portuguese, the friends I had, just the friends I had and the neighbours, nothing else. Because I don’t leave home much now. And now from May to September I’m leaving.”

She imagines a possible future in Portugal under special circumstances which could refer to a future bifurcation point:

*Francisca:* “No, I wouldn’t go back. Unless they make me go. If I become a little senile and they would say ‘Go to a care home there, it’s cheaper there than here’. Otherwise I won’t go back with a clear head. I am not going.”

While family seems important for Francisca’s preference to stay in Luxembourg, the most important is that she “likes it [life] here.” Luxembourg has become a home for her. She refers also to the mentality of people and social control (cultural and social aspects of belonging), when comparing Luxembourg with Portugal:

*Francisca:* “I want to say that the people there pay more attention to everything, how you dress, what shoes you wear, what doesn’t work and so on.”

She notes that in Luxembourg people do not care so much about how people go out and how they dress, and she prefers this commodity. As is demonstrated here, again two alternatives are confronted with each other – going back would involve being confronted with a certain social control of others living there, i.e. a judging behavior that she imagines of people living in Portugal.

A certain sense of belonging and attachment to her place of living becomes obvious when Francisca defends Luxembourg against critique from others:

*Francisca:* “Yeah. I don’t like that some people say bad things about Luxembourg. And I only say that those who are not happy arrive at the border and can leave again.”

However, as far as nationality is concerned, Francisca reports that she is Portuguese [according to her passport] and will “stay Portuguese until I die.” Here it becomes obvious that feeling connected to a place can be separate from the formal nationality. She does not identify with being a Luxembourgish national – also because of missing language competences as she says: however, she has started to like living in Luxembourg over the years, and bonds to her place of living have evolved.

Finally, an earlier experience of migration which dates back to the time before she migrated to Luxembourg appears as a long-lasting memory in Francisca’s narrative. This alternative trajectory of the past comes up when she is asked about longing for home, a feeling of *saudade*<sup>3</sup> for Portugal. Francisca notes here that she has never missed Portugal. However, before coming to Luxembourg, she spent two years

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<sup>3</sup>Saudade is a complex emotion that characterizes Lusitanian cultures, and it is related to aspects of solitude and ambivalence: it is a feeling of loss of a person, place, or situation while at the same time feeling joy for having had the opportunity of experiencing positive feelings in their regard, even if lost now. It is sometimes described as nostalgia or longing for something or someone, which however does not fully grasp its multifaceted character (for a detailed description, see Barros & Marinho Ribeiro, 2018).

in a third country, and she notes that she has since then ever longed for that country. It becomes obvious here that this other foreign experience had already left an “imprint” in her proculturative experience, which is interwoven with current interpretations and re-interpretations of past and present experiences. It is not unusual that migrants change country several times and such earlier experiences might make the adaptation to a new context even more difficult, if positive memories to this earlier migration prevail. They might also constitute an influence in evaluating later migration experiences as they can foster the imagination of a further alternative trajectory.

### *Second-Generation Experiences*

Let us now have a closer focus on the perspective of the daughter, Patricia, who came to Luxembourg at the age of 7 and has since then lived there. Her integration experience started with some difficulties as she had to repeat the first school year due to administrative difficulties and missing language skills. Most of her school peers were also Portuguese as the family lived in an area with many Portuguese immigrants. Here, also the spatial-temporal embeddedness of their experience becomes obvious: their integration started in the 1970s when Luxembourg was far less culturally diverse as it is today; however, a first wave of Portuguese immigration occurred during these years. Patricia describes her acculturation experience as positive – according to her, she has never experienced discrimination, and she feels fully integrated:

Patricia: *“Because I am fully integrated here in Luxembourg. My childhood, [bah] a part of my childhood I spent in this country.”*

She notes that her integration process is closely linked to her language learning (of the languages in the receiving country) which was possible by learning from her school peers, mostly Portuguese, who had already stayed longer in the country and translated for her in the beginning:

Patricia: *“Yes, after that I learned it slowly and then I started to learn Luxembourgish. Well French was easy.”*

She identifies strongly with both countries as becomes obvious when she refers to people who criticize either of both countries:

Patricia: *“I can say that I like Luxembourg, I hate it when the Portuguese speak badly of Luxembourg. Just as I hate it when Luxembourgers speak badly of Portugal.”*

Here, it becomes clear that she likes to live in Luxembourg and distances herself from Portuguese immigrants who display a negative attitude toward Luxembourg while at the same time feeling offended when people from Luxembourg talk negatively about Portugal.

Interestingly, she feels as a Portuguese and at the same time she feels close to Luxembourgers when conflicts between Portuguese and other groups appear, for

instance, when German and Portuguese co-workers have arguments in the multicultural work context of Luxembourg:

*“[...] When they (Germans) attack the Portuguese. Because the Luxembourgers also stand by us. Because, well, how to say, I can't completely dislike my nationality, my roots, because that will last forever. I like Portugal, if I have to, I'm going to a Portuguese dance, and I am not ashamed to say that I am Portuguese. I became Luxembourger because I grew up here, my girls were born here, I built my life here, I have a better life thanks to Luxembourg.”*

This excerpt shows how she is feeling Portuguese as part of her heritage, her “roots” that “will last forever” and that she does not hide, while feeling Luxembourgish as part of her becoming, i.e. her growing up and building a life in the receiving country.

Here again it becomes obvious how imagination plays a role in the evaluation of the life choices and trajectories: The comparison with alternatives brings a positive evaluation of the current life, where she highlights also the achievement of the goal of success which was important for creating a sense of belonging in the country of migration which has finally become home for the whole family and where she started a family of her own. This also contributes to a sense of coherence which is crucial for identity construction:

Patricia: *“Yes, but thanks to work, but you could do the same job elsewhere and for less money. Of course, it is also thanks to the work. But the country has given us a good life.”*

## 5 Discussion

Current approaches of acculturation and multicultural identity have neglected the question of what it means to belong and how a sense of belonging evolves in the context of migration. Newly arrivals often find themselves confronted with similar challenges and tasks such as learning country-specific skills, dealing with a smaller social network, language difficulties, or lack of cultural knowledge (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013). However, individual trajectories of adaptation can differ in timing and pace, depending also on immigrants' point in the lifespan (Titzmann & Lee, 2018), on earlier experiences, as well as on the spatio-historical time (Valsiner, 2014).

In the present contribution, we focused on one single case from the IRMA project. The application of the TEA and proacculturation concept has brought some insights into how a sense of belonging develops and what belonging actually means for first- and second-generation immigrants.

First-generation migrants who move to a new country as (young) adults have already spent years in other contexts and bring their package of memories with them. They have already known the sense of belonging to another (or more) place(s), and their memories about what could still be their place of living can make it difficult to commit to their new surroundings, especially if memories are positively colored. However, opportunity structures are important too when referring to the reality and possibilities of the moment – not having a (better) choice can help to overcome

feelings of ambivalence; imaginations and evaluations of alternatives can justify the choice and contribute to a sense of coherence.

For second generation, the concept of proculturation is different – they might have no or only limited first-hand experience of living in another place than the receiving country. They have grown up in the receiving country which has become their first reference while being confronted with their parents' heritage, memories, and expectations, as well as sometimes encountering an identity denial and labelling as a migrant by others (Barros et al., 2018; Barros & Albert, 2020).

## 6 The Fundamental Question Is “What Makes Us Feel to Belong?”

The present chapter could give some preliminary answers: belonging is not just the inclusion in social groups – it's one's personal feeling to have a place in society, in the world. To feel at ease can refer to spatial aspects of the environment (*The black roofs of Luxembourg which have become more beautiful over time*) but also to social aspects (*Gaining recognition through adequate payment for work*) and feeling at peace with one's situation (*Which is better than the imagined alternatives*). Having accomplished personal goals which stand intrapersonal comparison processes of alternative live trajectories seems to be a crucial aspect here.

A further aspect that appeared in the interviews was the social network and friendships that were built in the receiving country and that play a crucial role for the feeling of belonging. This was visible for the first and even more strongly for the second generation.

Thereby, the sense of belonging can relate to different reference points: the country of residence (which is being defended against negative views from others), the own ethnic group (which can be the most proximal context of living), and transnationally the country of origin (or even another third country; symbolized by the opportunity of commuting regularly and which provides an exit option in case of need).

In our single case analysis, social comparisons with others seemed to play a less crucial role. More precisely, Francisca in our example explicitly denied comparisons with others and judgment by others. This could be also a defense mechanism, in line with immunization where all information that stands cross to one's ideal self is not considered (Brandtstädter, 1999). Here, one should also reflect on the interview situation as well as the socio-political situation in Luxembourg that might have an impact on how the participants wanted to present themselves.

Our future analyses will bring further light into this important question. Belonging is a highly subjective experience – it is the interpretation of an objective state (if at all) – whereby the evaluation of this “objective” state remains always highly subjective itself and depends on the perspective and points of reference of each individual engaging in evaluation processes.

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# Political Plasticity and Culture



Fathali M. Moghaddam

*“Poor naked wretches, wheresoe’er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pittless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed raggedness defend  
you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta’en  
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp.  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou may’st shake the superflux to them  
And show the heavens more just.”*  
*King Lear* (3.IV.32–41)

Among the timeless themes in Shakespeare’s play *King Lear* is that of power and corruption, reminding us of the ancient adage “power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.” As long as Lear is king and enjoying absolute power, he neglects the plight of the “*Poor naked wretches*” in his kingdom. But after he has handed over his kingly powers and duties to his two older daughters and been cruelly cast out by them into the wilderness during a terrifying storm, the misery of those who are powerless, barefoot, and homeless finally enters his thoughts. Of course, in twenty-first-century Western societies, democracy is supposed to prevent the abuse of power, by placing limits on the powerful and making the government answerable to the people. For example, the US Constitution incorporates “checks and balances” designed to prevent corruption and power abuse. Yet, it has become very clear, and not just during the Donald Trump presidency (2016–2020), that democracy as practiced in the United States and other major societies is still seriously underdeveloped (Moghaddam, 2016).

Why is it that over 2500 years after the emergence of Athenian democracy, we are still struggling to achieve actualized democracy, involving “...full, informed,

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equal participation in wide aspects of political, economic, and cultural decision making independent of financial investment and resources” (Moghaddam, 2016, p. 4)? Why is movement from closed, dictatorial societies to more open, democratic societies so difficult to achieve? In this brief discussion, I argue that the best way to address this question is to give primacy to what Valsiner (2014) refers to as the zone between the existing and the possible, through the concept of *political plasticity*, which is the ability to change (or not change) social relations and cognitions in line with actual or desired structural changes (Moghaddam, 2019). In this way, we can include “non-events,” such as the failure to establish democracy after a popular revolution, as integral to a science of psychology. Furthermore, it highlights Valsiner’s insistence on studying minds and societies as unfolding *processes* (i.e., in their becoming) rather than as things with static characteristics.

I begin by discussing the extremely slow pace of change on the dictatorship-democracy continuum. Next, I discuss the concept of political plasticity and the zone between the existing and the possible. Finally, I examine limitations on political plasticity represented by culture and the normative system “out there” in collective processes, above and beyond individuals.

## 1 Change on the Dictatorship-Democracy Continuum

All major societies began as dictatorships, but there are no completely closed dictatorships in the twenty-first century – just as, at present, there are no actualized democracies. The major societies are situated at different points between the two extremes of absolute dictatorship and actualized democracy (Moghaddam, 2013).

Movement away from absolute dictatorship toward actualized democracy has been extremely slow. For example, around 2500 years ago, Athenian democracy gave the right to vote to free men, not women and not slaves. Around 23 centuries later, the American War of Independence led to the establishment of the United States and the formulation of the US Constitution. This “revolutionary” constitution gave the vote to free men, not women and not slaves. It was not until the twentieth century that women and ethnic minorities won the right to cast votes in US political elections, and voter suppression continues in the twenty-first century, particularly restricting the political participation of ethnic minorities. Even in the most important US elections, almost half of all eligible voters do not participate (Moghaddam, 2013, 2016) – in large part because of restrictions placed on them (e.g., not being given paid leave from work on election day, not having any way to reach the polling station, intentionally being given misleading information about voting places and dates – see Epperly et al., 2020, on the evolving nature of voter suppression in the United States).

But some change has come about globally, in that even dictatorial regimes, such as those in Russia and Iran, see it necessary to use the language and symbolism of democracy to portray themselves as democratic. Thus, for example, elections are regularly held in Iran, even though most Iranians see these elections as meaningless

because the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran clearly stipulates that society will be governed by an un-elected, male, religious Supreme Leader (*velayat-e-faghigh*), who serves as the ultimate decider on what is permissible according to Shi'a Islam. Even the rulers of North Korea, which together with Iran is one of the darkest dictatorships, insist on including the term “democratic” in the official name of this country, *Democratic People's Republic of Korea*. Thus, the idea that democracy and “rule of the people, by the people” is desirable has become widespread in the twenty-first century.

Whereas in the United States, right-wing authoritarian elites are concerned to exclude the masses (particularly ethnic minorities) from elections, in Russia, Iran, and some other more dictatorial countries, right-wing authoritarian elites are concerned to force the masses to participate in elections. A major reason for this difference is that in the United States, liberal representatives genuinely opposed to right-wing authoritarian elites can compete for political office, but in Iran, Russia, and other relatively “closed” societies, those opposed to right-wing authoritarian elites are not permitted to compete in elections. Those who vote in Iran and Russia can only choose right-wing authoritarian representatives.

In countries closer to dictatorship than to democracy, including China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran, leadership continues to be dominated by authoritarian strongmen. Even in a number of countries that were edging toward democracy, such as India, Brazil, Venezuela, and Turkey, authoritarian strongmen have taken charge. This style of leader-follower relationship has resisted change and is even becoming more prominent (through populist movements) in the twenty-first century. The election of Joe Biden seems to signal a shift away from this style of leadership in the United States, but we must keep in mind that about 72 million Americans voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 US presidential election.

Continuity and resilience in style of leader-follower relations in many countries around the globe is illustrative of a general point: political plasticity is extremely limited.

## 2 Why Is Political Plasticity So Limited?

What explains the zone between the existing and the possible (Valsiner, 2014) in the domain of political behavior? I came face to face with this question in a very practical way when, together with thousands of other Western educated Iranians, I returned to Iran with the anti-Shah revolution in 1979. The American-backed dictator was toppled, there was a power vacuum, and there was a great deal of enthusiasm for democratic change, particularly among the young. The “possible” seemed to have no limits. In the first half of 1979, both women and men enjoyed unparalleled freedoms to express themselves and explore ideas about how Iranian society should be newly organized. But by the end of the first year of the revolution, the dictator Khomeini had replaced the dictator Shah, and Iranian society was on the

road to becoming an even darker and more closed society than prior to the 1979 revolution.

A critical assessment of other major revolutions in history reveals the same pattern: revolutions typically replace one dictator with another. The French Revolution (1789) led to the dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), the Russian Revolution (1917) led to the dictatorship of Josef Stalin (1878–1953), the Chinese Revolution brought Mao Zedong (1893–1976) to dictatorial power, and so on. Most recently, the Arab Spring (2011–2013) brought back military dictatorship to Egypt and instability and “little dictators” in Libya and some other Arab regions (only Tunisia has had a more positive outcome). The claim that the American Revolution is different because it resulted in a democracy is only valid if we extend the timeline considerably – yes, the American Revolution did *eventually* lead to a limited form of democracy in the United States by the late twentieth century.

Clearly, political plasticity is extremely limited. We humans are capable of outlining different forms of democratic societies and democratic constitutions *on paper*, but the zone between the existing and the possible (Valsiner, 2014) is enormous in terms of our actual political behavior. To take another example, consider how even in countries where leadership is selected through elections, females still constitute a minority at the highest political levels, and in very few instances are there female heads of state. There is enormous jubilation in the United States that after a century (!) of women being allowed to vote, at last a female vice-president (Kamala Harris) has been elected. In explaining the extremely limited nature of political plasticity, I give priority to culture and “cognition out there” in the wider world (of course, this follows Vygotsky, whose work Valsiner helped to disseminate in Western societies, Van Der Veer & Valsiner, 1994).

Prior to the arrival of the infant into her society, there already exists “out there” a cultural system and way of life, with norms, rules, values, and languages that serve to guide people as to how to behave correctly in each context. Prescriptions for “how to think” and “how to problem solve” are integral to this culture “out there,” external to individuals. In this sense, cognition takes place firstly at the social level of relations between people and only secondly within individual minds. The “correct way of thinking” is already there in social relationships before the infant arrives in the world. This includes styles of thinking about the social world and different social groups, as well as the ingroup. It also includes styles of problem-solving, such as when a person is forced by circumstances to take action that contradicts their own expressed beliefs. In some major societies, a contradiction between “my beliefs” and “my actions” results in the person feeling uncomfortable and experiencing anxiety or “dissonance” (Festinger, 1957). Individuals learn from their cultural surroundings when and how to experience dissonance, as well as what steps to take to reduce dissonance.

From this perspective, “cognitive dissonance,” “social attributions,” “stereotyping,” “stereotype threat,” “heuristic biases,” and all other features of cognition as identified in mainstream psychology at the individual level are first present as cultural practices and in social relationships “out there” in the larger world. Socialization and the process of “becoming,” of learning to function effectively as a member of a

particular society, involves acquiring the styles of cognition *already present* in cultural practices and social relationships. Thus, what mainstream psychologists tap into through their individual-level measures of cognition are phenomena that reflect ongoing cultural practices. An implication is that psychologists must pay a great deal more research attention to cognition “out there” as the source of individual-level cognition, rather than focusing on individual-level cognition as self-contained, pre-wired, and causally determining behavior.

The focus on cognition “out there” in cultural practices and relations between people, and secondarily as inside individual minds, leads to the realization as to why political plasticity is so limited. Consider the inability of revolutions, such as the 1979 revolution in Iran and the 2011 revolution in Egypt, to end dictatorship. The toppling of the ruling dictator, the Pahlavi Shah in Iran and President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, was the relatively easy part of the revolution. The task of moving from a dictatorial, closed society to a more democratic, open society proved to be far more challenging and unattainable for now. This is because of two sets of factors: first, rigidities in the world external to individuals and, second, rigidities internal to individuals. The rigidities internal to individuals are extensively studied in mainstream psychology. I turn to rigidities external to individuals, which have received far less attention, but are relatively far more important in shaping political behavior.

### 3 Cultural Limitations on Political Plasticity

In order to better understand rigidities in political plasticity, we must progress beyond the reductionist and causal perspective provided by mainstream psychology. This perspective assumes that human behavior is causally determined and leads us to seek the causes of behavior within individuals (for broader discussions of causation, see Harré & Moghaddam, 2016). This reductionist causal account of behavior is valid in *some* instances. For example, Mary has an automobile accident that results in a serious head injury, and she temporarily loses the ability to see. This is *efficient causation*, in the sense of “X” (head injury in an automobile accident) causing “Y” (Mary’s loss of vision). After some medical treatment, Mary gradually recovers her vision. Her eyesight is regularly tested in different ways during her recovery, and Mary is asked to report the letters and number she sees. During this testing, Mary explains to the medical doctor, “I far prefer looking at numbers than letters.” “Why is that?” The doctor asks, “Do numbers have more meaning for you?” With this question, the doctor has now shifted the discussion from the realm of causal determinism to that of normative regulation. Mary explains that she is a statistician and works with numbers every day; she even sees strings of numbers when she listens to Mozart, her favorite composer.

While some of our behavior is causally determined, as in “When X happens, then Y always follows,” much of our behavior is normatively regulated. Norms and other facets of culture are not causes of behavior – they do not determine what will happen, but only what *should* happen. One should wear dark formal clothes at funeral

ceremonies in most Western societies, for example. Most people (but not all) attending funerals conform to this norm. Most of the time, for most of us, our behavior is patterned by what culture tells us is the correct form of behavior in the given context.

Because local cultural practices guide our behavior in most contexts, most of our behavior is patterned and predictable. Even though we follow individual paths and goals and have styles of doing things that are to some degree different and perhaps even unique, our behavior is patterned by the local normative system that clearly indicates to us how to behave correctly. A useful analogy is driving behavior on roads. Each driver has a destination and a route, as well as a style of driving, that is to some degree different. However, every driver is aware of what constitutes “correct driving behavior.” We are guided by the local rules for correct driving. For example, I learned to drive an automobile in England, where one drives on the left-hand side of the road. Of course, when I am in the United States (and many other countries), I drive on the right-hand side of the road.

There are numerous differences between what constitutes “correct driving” in England and the United States, just as there are numerous differences between “correct behavior” in English and US universities. Some of these differences are blatant, while others are relatively subtle. For example, the grading system for evaluating students is different in UK and US universities. Relatively more subtle are the differences in the letters of references written in support of students by professors in the United Kingdom and the United States. The correct way to write letters of reference in the United States is to use highly effusive language and write in greater detail and at length.

The world “out there,” regulating our behavior, constituted the first and most powerful limitation on political plasticity. The world out there includes the built environment – the buildings, roads, statues, town-planning, landscaping, and every other aspect of the environment shaped by humans. Another important feature of the external world is institutions, with their particularly organizational cultures and structures. Formal “black letter law” is another aspect of this external world. But while formal “black letter law” is an obvious target for those seeking change, the informal normative system also acts as a limiting factor on political plasticity and is often much more difficult to change. Numerous revolutionaries have found that while they are able to change the formal constitution and re-write laws overnight, changing the informal normative system that regulates behavior is far more difficult. This informal normative system is invisible, but its power and impact are as concrete and real as that of the built environment. Working in tandem, the built environment and the informal normative system have an (often unseen) influence on political behavior.

For example, consider how space in the typical parliament building is arranged. The majority of seats are spaced around an elevated platform, on which are located a small number of seats reserved for the most important leaders. Among the seats placed on the higher platform, one seat is usually more prominent than the others, reserved for the most important government official in the building. Associated with this hierarchical arrangement of space in the parliament (and other government buildings) is a normative system that regulates and endorses a particular style of leader-follower relations. For example, in Iran after the revolution, the discussions

and decision-making that led to the writing of a new “revolutionary” constitution took place in buildings constructed prior to the revolution, such as the old *Majlis* (parliament) building. As soon as “revolutionaries” took their seats in the old *Majlis* building, designed to reflect the hierarchical and dictatorial nature of pre-revolution Iran, they began to conform to dictatorial leader-follower style of behavior. The informal normative system that had prevailed prior to the revolution continued to shape leader-follower relationships after the revolution, with the result that one dictatorship replaced another, with no real change in style of leader-follower relations.

Although after every revolution there tend to be superficial changes in the built environment, such as the changing of the names of streets and the destruction of certain statues, this does not alter the more profound continuities in the use of space and its relation to political behavior (for a broader discussion of how the built environment shapes behavior, see Goldhagen, 2017). The built environment reflects the hierarchical and unequal nature of society. Revolutions have tended to change who is on top and who is on lower levels, but they have failed to end hierarchies and inequalities as such.

Although revolution brings about a speedy change in leadership – from King Louis XVI to Emperor Napoleon in France, from the Tsar Nicholas II to Josef Stalin in Russia, and from the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran – the relationship between the leader and the rest of the population does not change quickly, if at all. For example, Ayatollah Khomeini continued the tradition of absolute dictatorship in Iran, and the behavior of people around Khomeini, their use of space around him, their bows and courtesies, and their kissing of his hand and the hem of his cloak, continued the long tradition of micro-level behavior in leader-follower relations in Iran.

On the surface, the behavior of the Shah when greeting Iranians paying homage to him might seem very different from that of Khomeini. The Shah would sit on modern European style furniture, whereas Khomeini would often sit on the carpeted floor and visitors would remove their shoes. There might not even be any Western style furniture around Khomeini. On the surface, then, the reception room where the Shah and Khomeini greet visitors look very different. But at a deeper level, there are important continuities. The space where visitors are received has a “top” (*ballaa*) and a “bottom” (*paa-een*) section. The bottom is where the entrance is located, and the top is away from the entrance, toward the center of the space. The most important person sits at the top of the room, and all others must face this exalted person, never turning their back to him. Each visitor bows before the exalted leader and then finds a place to sit in keeping with their status – the lower the status, the closer the person sits to the entrance. The exalted leader is the center of attention of everyone present, at all times. Every whim, each hint, and even slight indications given by the exalted leader are taken as a command that must be carried out. The exalted leader does not even need to give commands, because by hinting at a preference the leader is issuing a command. Anyone daring to question the exalted leader’s preferences is immediately set upon and in one way or another eliminated. During the time of their power, the Shah and Khomeini enjoyed the same dictatorial authority and the same relationship with the Iranian population, despite their surface differences.

## 4 Concluding Comment

Occasionally, we are reminded of the severe limitations on political plasticity and of how little progress we have made toward actualized democracy over thousands of years. Such reminders tend to be shocking and anxiety-provoking for supporters of democracy and the open society, because they illuminate deep continuities in political behavior across long time periods. The coming to power of Donald Trump in the United States has been one such traumatizing reminder. Trump's political influence must serve as an impetus for psychologists to more closely examine the zone between the existing and the possible in the realm of political behavior (Moghaddam, 2019; Valsiner, 2014).

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**Part V**  
**Aesthetics in Culture and Mind**

# Aesthetic Notes on Ornamented Lives



Robert E. Innis

## 1 I

There is a passage in John Dewey’s classic *Art as Experience* (Dewey, 1934) with multiple intersections with Jaan Valsiner’s (2018) systematic and historical explorations in his *Ornamented Lives* of the “lived logic” of the “deep subjectivity of the intra-personal field of affective ornaments of the mind” (p. 213). Dewey writes:

The moot problem of the relation of the decorative and the expressive is solved when it is viewed in the context of the integration of matter and form. The expressive inclines to the side of meaning, the decorative to that of sense. There is a hunger of the eyes for light and color; there is distinctive satisfaction when this hunger is fed. Wallpaper, rugs, tapestries, the marvelous play of changing tints in sky and flowers, fulfill the need. Arabesques, gay colors, have a like office in paintings. Some of the charm of architectural structures—for they have charm as well as dignity—derives from the fact that, in their exquisite adaptations of lines and spaces, they meet a similar organic need of the sensorimotor system. (p. 129)

Dewey poses and is in search of answers to the same type of questions that have motivated Valsiner’s deep and detailed analyses and the treasury of sources he brings to our attention:

What about carvings of capitals, friezes, cornices, canopies, brackets? How do the minor arts fit in, workings in ivory, alabaster, plaster of paris, terra-cotta, silver and gold, ornamental iron work in brackets, signs, hinges, screens and grills? Is the same music nonrepresentative when played in a concert hall and representative when it is part of a sacramental service in a church? (1934, p. 231)

The contrasts and connections highlighted in these pregnant texts – the decorative and the expressive, matter and form; the linking of the expressive with meaning and the decorative with sense; the hunger of the eyes for light and color, whether in nature or in art; and the charm of architectural structures and the so-called minor

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arts that lure and inform the dynamic differentiations of the sensorimotor and affective systems – mirror in remarkable, but not identical, ways those running through Valsiner’s weaving of complex analytical frameworks and existential issues connected with our ornamented lives. Valsiner maps various pathways to constructing or locating the elements for an experience-based aesthetics as well as an aesthetics-based theory of experience that can give us access to the “interior sign fields” (p. 239) of the self and its dynamically open infinite borders. Echoing James, Dewey holds in full agreement that we must not suppose that “experience has the same definite limits as the things with which it is concerned” (1934, p.197). As to the heuristic power of this notion, Dewey writes that “in every experience, there is the pervading underlying qualitative whole that corresponds to and manifests the whole organization of activities which constitute the mysterious human frame” (1934, p. 204; Innis, 2011). Determining this frame is, and has been, Valsiner’s deepest long-term concern. It is the focal point and goal of *Ornamented Lives*.

Underlying Valsiner’s retrieval of and deep engagement with the art historical and cultural analyses of Lipps, Riegl, Wörringer, Simmel, and many others is an indispensable semiotic and philosophical stratum: C. S. Peirce’s and Susanne Langer’s differently formulated, but ultimately complementary, semiotics (Innis, 2013) and William James’s account of the dynamics of what he called the free water of consciousness in his *Principles of Psychology*. Although neither Peirce nor James developed an explicit aesthetics, their work has deep aesthetic relevance (Shusterman, 2010, 2011; Innis, 2019b, 2020; Dryden, 2001) which Valsiner put to great theoretical advantage. Langer’s (1953, 1967) powerful semiotic theory of the import of art and its grounds in presentational/pleromatic processes of abstraction plays a key role in *Ornamented Lives*.

Dewey is merely mentioned in *Ornamented Lives*—in the same sentence with Theodor Lipps, James Mark Baldwin, and Lev Vygotsky—and his work plays no analytical role in it. Dewey, however, one of the original “big three” along with Peirce and James at the origins of American pragmatism, did develop an explicit aesthetics in *Art as Experience*, taking up operatively, not exegetically, central ideas of Peirce and James (Innis, 2014, 2019b, 2020; Shusterman, 2010, 2011). His aesthetics, when linked with the work of Peirce, James, and Langer, offers precise and nuanced supplementations, extensions, and supports for the analytical framework and conclusions of Valsiner’s indispensable volume.

Dewey reconstitutes in different ways elements from the work of Peirce, most importantly his theory of quality, rather than his theory of signs, and its connections with feeling and affect, which Valsiner foregrounds. Dewey’s model of aesthetic experience also implicitly recognizes the distinctiveness of iconicity as an irreducible domain of signification beyond discursivity (Innis, 2014, 2019b, 2020). Running throughout *Art as Experience* are allusions to James’s theme-field-margin schema of consciousness, his well-known image of the flights and perchings of a bird to illustrate the transitive and substantive dimensions or parts of consciousness, and, in the background, resonances of actual Jamesian aesthetic remarks as Shusterman has shown. And as to Dewey’s links to Langer, in spite of her early dismissal of Dewey’s pragmatism and of Peirce’s theory of signs in her 1942 *Philosophy in a New Key*,

she confirms Dewey's analyses of the core idea of energies of objects that make up our life worlds and the rhythmic nature of the interior sign fields of those dwelling within them that Valsiner emphasizes (see Innis, 2016).

For Dewey, and clearly for Valsiner, "esthetic experience is experience in its integrity... experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience; freed, that is, from factors that subordinate an experience as it is directly had to something beyond itself. To esthetic experience, then, the philosopher must go to understand what experience is" (1934, pp. 285–286). As *Ornamented Lives* shows, it is not just the philosopher who turns to esthetic experience for that purpose. In what follows, I offer a kind of extended, confirming footnote to Valsiner's schematization of the philosophical import and dimensions of ornamentation. My remarks make up a kind of web of *exemplifying linkages* between Dewey and the Peirce-James-Langer triad that plays such a central role in Valsiner's engrossing reflections. In *Ornamented Lives*, Valsiner, as always, invites us not just to think *about* something in a new way, but to think *further* as well as *alongside*.

## 2 II

The German language art theorists and social philosophers that Valsiner discusses – Lipps, Riegl, Wörringer, and Simmel – play no role in Dewey. However, their concerns with the architectural domain and its accompanying ornamental arts, the social and cultural matrices for structuring the affective fields of the self, which Valsiner takes up and develops, have their counterparts in Dewey's many architectural observations (Innis, 2019a). Dewey sees aesthetic values in architecture, or the lack thereof and the presence of other "values," as "peculiarly dependent upon meanings drawn from collective human life" (1934, p. 242), precisely the domain of cultural psychology. Both Valsiner and Dewey are well aware of the danger of putting the fine or higher arts, no matter how creative they are, on a pedestal by themselves as singularly more "spiritual" or "ideal," standing apart from common or community life. Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics, and his philosophically oriented critical social psychology, developed further by G. H. Mead, supports a thesis that is also at the heart of Valsiner's project: ornamentation exemplifies a core feature of life and, in Dewey's words, "everything that intensifies the sense of immediate living is an object of intense admiration" (1934, p.5).

Such an intensification, Dewey remarks, is found not just in formal art but in such phenomena to which Valsiner also alludes and presents in illuminating detail: "bodily scarification, waving feathers, gaudy robes, shining ornaments of gold and silver, of emerald and jade, likewise belong to the aesthetic arts" (1934, p. 5). Indeed, Dewey goes on to "include domestic utensils, furnishings of tent and house, rugs, mats, jars, pots, bows, spears" as things that are "enhancements of processes of everyday life" (1934, p. 5). Valsiner's parallel theoretical focus is on the revelatory, heuristic, and enhancement power of ornamentations: "it is the overwhelming nature of their distribution in space and time that captures the whole psychological

system of the human being by filling in the peripheral aspects of ongoing actions with their implied directionality for feeling” (2018, p. 237). As he stated at the beginning of his analytical and constructive journey, “my basic thesis is that it is through the peripheral experiencing of external ornaments we develop their internal field-like counterparts in our minds—leading to further ornamentation of our environments” (2018, p. 12). The “peripheral” dimension here involves our tacit assimilation *of* and *to* the fields of ornaments, a process that is not focally controlled, “overwhelming, yet not primary, in human lives” (2018, p. 3).

The enhancements brought about by external ornaments that Dewey and Valsiner are pointing to do not involve an isolation of sense qualities, becoming, as Dewey put it, an “empty embellishment, factitious ornamentation – like sugar figures on a cake – and external bedecking” (1934, p. 132). Rather, there are brought about, as Valsiner puts it, a “new affective synthesis” (2018, p. 219), a thickening of the “affective mass of the flow of experiencing” (2018, p. 216), and even, indeed, an “affective explosion” (2018, p.219), where the affective borders of “internal affective fields” that mark what Dewey called “the live creature” and Langer called “felt life” are shifted and rendered labile. Such an affective synthesis is a form of dynamic ordering of Stern’s internal and external infinities that define the poles of life process. Peirce (1931–1958) characterized this life process as occurring in multi-leveled forms of unlimited semiosis taking place in the “bottomless lake where ... our whole past experience is continually in our consciousness, though most of it sunk to a great depth of dimness” (7.547).

Yet in this depth, Peirce proposed, there are various forces that put both our past and our future into motion. Such processes give what Peirce called “a peculiar *quale* to my whole consciousness” (1931–1958, 6.223), a sense of being ordered or tuned both internally and externally. As Peirce writes:

The *quale*-consciousness is not confined to simple sensations. There is a peculiar *quale* to purple, though it be only a mixture of red and blue. There is a distinctive *quale* to every combination of sensations so far as it is really synthesized – a distinctive *quale* to this moment as it is to me – a distinctive *quale* to every day and every week, a peculiar *quale* to my whole consciousness. (1931–1958, 6.223)

The range of this peculiar *quale* is the affective tone or *Gefühlston* that Valsiner foregrounds and that the ornamented world both elicits and embodies in its own ramifying and saturating peripheral ways. Ornamentation, looked at from a Peircean viewpoint, goes “all the way down” to the recognition of what Langer (1967) called seeds of “physiognomic value” encountered at the very threshold of sense where the world is encountered and touches as an affective figure on a ground. There is, she writes, “a reflection of inward feeling in the most typically outward, objective data of sensation” even if we cannot capture precisely or comprehensively their characters (p. 178). Indeed, no perception of any sort leaves us untouched, even if we are not attending to it. Such is the signification of the domain of ornamentation that Valsiner explores.

### 3 III

Near the end of his article on “Peirce’s Theory of Quality,” published 1 year after *Art as Experience*, Dewey (1935) wrote that “I am quite sure that he [Peirce], above all modern philosophers, has opened the road which permits a truly experiential philosophy to be developed which does not, like traditional empirical philosophies, cut experience off from nature” (p. 375). Experience is here, according to Dewey, to be understood as cultural experience, both psychologically real and collective. As to the central role of nature in formulating a general aesthetic theory with a bearing on the centrality of ornamentation, Valsiner, referring to the basic distinction between the linearity and curvilinearity of forms as exemplified in ornament patterns, remarks that nature is “fully nonlinear” (2018, p. 239). He further claims, perhaps too generally, thinking of the paradigmatic role of classical architecture and its now challenged heritage, that human culture is “mostly built through the use of linear forms, except for the case of emulating nature” (2018, p. 239). In spite of the problematic claim of the “mostly” linear nature of human culture, Valsiner nevertheless shows that there is an ever-fluctuating, indeed rhythmic, combination of curvilinearity and linearity to culture and especially to ornamentation. Ornamentation is marked by dynamic spiral or helical forms on surfaces and realized in materials in different dimensional configurations, including the human body with its “markings” of difference and sameness. Such is the inner dynamic logic of nature as manifested in ornaments.

In James Bunn (2002), *Wave Forms: A Natural Syntax for Rhythmic Language*, we find a passage bearing upon this complex issue that underlies, supplements, and supports Valsiner’s framing of ornamentation in terms of rhythms, a constant theme in his book, where it is the visual, understood as embodied vision, that is the main focus of analysis. Bunn writes:

In every art form one finds a rhythmic pattern as a base. These patterns, though formal, are everywhere evidence of material in action. Principles of symmetry provide a way of explaining how aesthetic patterns are enactments of the very principles that structure the universe in rhythmic patterns. Every artwork, whatever its nature, is constructed of materials that make the patterns develop at the same deep level as the laws of physics and biology. Perhaps the most important thesis is that the principles of symmetry can help explain the ways that nature distributes patterns as stabilizing structures. If symmetry conserves structures in rhythmic patterns of material, works of art also should enact those same kinds of harmonic principles but in wonderfully strange and sometimes discordant harmonies of form. I believe [that] symmetry theory can explain why the arts are not just an ‘add-on’, but that they demonstrate in different media and by different enactments the ways that the world works, moves, and stabilizes itself in rhythms. What I have called natural syntax is a way of describing these physical transformations of pattern. (xii–xiii)

These profound and provocative remarks point to the implicit metaphysical import of Valsiner’s interpretive framework. Looked at from Dewey’s pragmatist naturalist perspective, a fundamental feature of experience itself as a natural process, its “natural syntax,” is that it is a self-reconstructing widening and unlimited spiral or gyre of undergoings and doings quite generally that puts the body and its linkages to the

world into play for the sake of building a world for ever-tenuous, yet existentially vital, experiential satisfactions. Dewey writes: “What is not so generally perceived is that every uniformity and regularity of change in nature is a rhythm. The terms ‘natural law’ and ‘natural rhythm’ are synonymous. As far as nature is to us more than a flux lacking order in its mutable changes, as far as it is more than a whirlpool of confusions, it is marked by rhythms” (1934, p. 155).

In his contribution to a *Festschrift* for James, the subject of which is the “practical character of reality,” Dewey (1908) wrote that “the rational function seems to be intercalated in a scheme of practical adjustments” (p. 127) and that the fundamental fact of the self-world relation is “the presence of organic response, influencing and modifying every content, every subject matter of awareness” (p. 129). As Dewey (1934) put it, “an act of perception proceeds by waves that extend serially throughout the entire organism” (p. 55), “qualifying” the tacit, background awareness of one’s body as dwelling in irreversible time and subject to its spiraling and self-reconstructing rhythmic patterns that establish the conditions of an indwelling in a world marked by “aesthetic rationality,” a quality or condition that ornamentation is meant to stabilize and augment, as Valsiner shows. In his “Affective Thought,” Dewey (1931) wrote that “changes in the surroundings involve correlated changes in the organism, and so the eye and ear gradually become acclimatized ... integration in the object permits and secures a corresponding integration with basic organic activities” (p. 122). Ornamentation, looked at in this way, plays a central role in the deep somatic processes of experiencing in which objects are produced and “made over in consonance with basic organic requirements” (p. 122). These requirements demand periods of remission of focal attention as protection against the numbing effect of “recurrent overstimulation” (1934, p. 220), which ornamentation’s logic, as Valsiner shows, strives to avoid.

There is a further aspect of the theme of lines and rhythms that is a central link between Dewey’s aesthetics and Valsiner’s work. Although it foregrounds something rather different than what Valsiner emphasizes, it forces us to think further. Dewey (1934) writes:

Nature ... does not present us with lines in isolation. As experienced, they are the lines of objects; boundaries of things. They define the shapes by which we ordinarily recognize objects about us. Hence lines, even when we try to ignore everything else and gaze upon them in isolation, carry over the meaning of the objects of which they have been constituent parts. They are expressive of the natural scenes they have defined for us. While lines demarcate and define objects, they also assemble and connect. (p. 103)

But our indwelling in them through our body-based forms of apprehension assemble and connect us both to ourselves and to our experienced situations, instilling in us “motor lines of response” with their attendant somatic tonus and formation of habitual forms of response. Dewey (1934) writes:

... lines express the ways in which things act upon one another and upon us; the ways in which, when objects act together, they reinforce and interfere. For this reason, lines are wavering, upright, oblique, crooked, majestic; for this reason they seem in direct perception to have even moral expressiveness. They are earthbound and aspiring; intimate and coldly aloof; enticing and repellent. They carry with them the properties of objects. (p. 105)

Our engagements with lines and their exemplifying properties do not leave us indifferent or unchanged, especially those that surround us in non-functional ways, as Valsiner shows ornamentation does. It engenders what Langer called a “permanent tonicity” (1967, p. 175) in our experience, a sense of the qualitative completeness and livingness marking Valsiner’s interior sign fields and the affective syntheses of selving. Indeed, using ornamentation as a normative notion, as Valsiner effectively does, one could say that absence of “authentic” ornamentation can lead to “toxic tonicity,” the effect of consequent failures in carrying out the affective synthesis of realizing one’s selfhood or in constructing sustaining material and cultural-semiotic environments. Affective asthenia arises in environments marked by mere repetition, the absence of varying recurrences, and the sensory poverty of life contexts. The essential underlying “aesthetic” or “deep experiential” role and necessity of ornamentation that Valsiner establishes are directed against such asthenia. If, as Dewey writes, “esthetic rhythm is a matter of perception and therefore includes whatever is contributed by the self in the active process of perceiving” (1934, p. 169), then, as Valsiner makes clear and Dewey confirms, the lived contexts of ornamented lives must be filled with presentational or significant forms that by the pull and energies of their elements effect the furtherance of experiences of different ranges of consummatory completeness and affective synthesis (1934, p. 170).

Rhythm, Dewey held, is “ordered variation of manifestation of energy,” a variation that marks organic life’s craving for variety as well as order, and, as Dewey remarked, is marked by James’s notion of the “ever, not quite” (1934, p. 175), precisely what Valsiner’s examples show. Variation is equally important with order, indeed, “an indispensable coefficient of esthetic order” (1934, p.170). Such an order is not a property of objects alone but of the multidimensional – affective, actional, and conceptual – reconstructive synthesizing relations of the self with objects that surround it, both natural and constructed. The types of ornamentation that Valsiner brings to our attention are marked in many different ways by various sorts of recurring relationships that, as Dewey puts it, “serve to define and limit parts, giving them individuality of their own” (1934, p.172). It is precisely this individuality that is formed by our indwelling in Valsiner’s “peripheral fields” of ornaments that sustain the assembling of our past infinities and project our future infinities in a dynamic and non-objectifiable felt present that Valsiner foregrounds with his reliance on Peirce and Stern. As Langer (1967) writes, the life of feeling itself is held together by “rhythmic concatenation” of integrated elements that are ideally progressively more and more unified, giving rise to the agent as a “vital matrix” (p. 322) or, absent such concatenation, to the agent as subject to dispersion and dissolution, unable, as Peirce put it, to bind time through the multi-leveled syntheses of the self. As to these syntheses, to be fully alive, Dewey writes, “the future is not ominous but a promise; it surrounds the present as a halo. It consists of possibilities that are felt as a possession of what is now and here. In life that is truly life, everything overlaps and merges” (1934, p. 17) – ideally, that is.

Dewey’s characterizes and supports in his own way Valsiner’s schematization of the infinite backward-forward, self-assembling, process nature of the self and of selving: “Every movement of experience in completing itself recurs to its

beginning, since it is a satisfaction of a prompting initial need. But the recurrence is with a difference: it is charged with all the differences the journey out and away from the beginning has made” (1934, p. 175). This is a way of thinking about what Dewey called the *fundedness* of experience in which the past is active in the pregnant present that is oriented toward an intimated but unknown future immanent in the present process as its Jamesian “overtones” or “fringes.” “The need of life itself pushes us out into the unknown” (p. 175).

This “being pushed,” which is also a “being drawn,” involves tension and stretched time, the coordination of “various sensory-motor energies” that *move* the perceiver/self in line with objects that seem “to move from within” (1934, p. 183), as in the moving lines and spirals of the tensive tessellations and ribbons of borders and end points of capitals that Valsiner presents in rich detail. What Dewey writes about the experience of a painting, with a gesture to Delacroix, applies to the perception of ornamental structures, namely, that “there is an impact that precedes all definite recognition of what it is about ... This effect is particularly conspicuous for most persons in music. The impression directly made by an harmonious ensemble ... is often described as [its] musical quality” (1934, p. 151). This is a recurrent theme in Valsiner’s analysis. Langer, for her part, speaking of the inner process of art, but clearly applicable to decoration and the ornamented self, sees it as proceeding “from felt activity to perceptible quality; so it is ‘quality of life’ that is meant by ‘livingness’ in art” (1967, p. 152). And, as Valsiner claims, it is precisely this quality of life that ornamentation strives to effect or bring about and to sustain.

There is a passage in one of Peirce’s metaphysical essays that can help us understand with respect to our ornamented lives the general semiotic and normative import of the notions of an “harmonious ensemble” and its “musical quality,” themes Valsiner has taken up from Hroar Klempe’s fundamental work. What Peirce (1998) writes about esthetic enjoyment extends beyond art in the strict sense to the ornamented peripheral domains of experience in which Valsiner has shown we carry out our lives: “we attend to the totality of Feeling – and especially to the total resultant Quality of Feeling presented... yet it is a sort of intellectual sympathy, a sense that here is a feeling that one can comprehend, a reasonable feeling” (vol. 2, p. 190).

Valsiner has shown that ornamentation in the broadest sense and in its particular instances both elicits and exemplifies in its “significant forms” a material felt quality of our lives in time. As he abundantly shows, it provides in its unique way, yet clearly along with other cultural forms, “islands of seeming stability” with their “implied directionality of feeling” (2018, p. 237) that can saturate a person’s whole field of experience. Dewey confirms, in his own way, such a role for ornamental orderings: “In a world like ours, every living creature that attains sensibility welcomes order with a response of harmonious feeling whenever it finds a congruous order about it” (1934, p. 13). Such harmonious feeling arises both spontaneously and as a result of operative deliberate action on our part. Indeed, while its spontaneity is manifested in an event, it is a prolonged and dedicated existential task to construct, both individually and collectively, the congruous orders. To understand the role of ornamentation in human life is to see that it is part of the orders of

aesthetic rationality needed, as Dewey put it in full agreement with Valsiner, for “the stability essential to living” (1934, p. 13).

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# Pleromatization: Bringing Cultural Psychology Closer to Human Experience



Sven Hroar Klempe and Olga Lehmann

## 1 Introduction

Along with an impressive academic career, Jaan Valsiner has revitalized and developed several scientific notions that stand at the basis of theorization in cultural psychology. In parallel to scholars such as Richard Shweder (1991) and Michael Cole (1995), Valsiner has developed his own comprehensive theoretical foundation of general psychology as well as developmental and cultural psychology. Therefore, it is challenging to summarize highlights of his work; his contributions to theoretical science are rather characterized as processes. His emphasis on the process-oriented approach to generalization and scientific innovation is also the reason why both his attitude and his contributions are so generous academically: There is room for new contributions, as long as they can expand our understanding of the crossroads between the human mind and culture.

For instance, there are some core aspects that characterize Valsiner's explorations of these crossroads between mind and culture. One of these is his interest in Peirce's stands upon semiotics and philosophy of science. Peirce pledged for a thinking process that is characterized by the interaction between doubts and beliefs (Peirce, 1877/1986). Doubts form the precondition for investigating something, and the aim of such an inquiry is to achieve a fixed belief *as if* it represents the truth. A similar procedure might imply integrating notions from other disciplines, as metaphors that support the expansion of our understanding of the reality of psychological phenomena. This presupposes that we have a conception of such a reality, of

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243

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course. According to Peirce, just a conception of the reality is sufficient to let it guide the inquiry. In his own words, “If investigation cannot be regarded as proving that there are real things, it at least does not lead to a contrary conclusion” (Peirce, 1877/1986, p. 254). The notion of reality is a regulative idea. Yet, there must be a felt conformity between a belief and the experienced reality. This is achieved by applying proper terms that create a *feeling* of adequacy. This emotional guidance in theory of knowledge forms the first and fundamental step in a Piercian *semiosis*, or processing of signs. Peirce regarded logic as a play with signs. In a quest to better understand this processing of signs and its emotional mediation, Valsiner has introduced the notion of pleromatization into cultural psychology. In this paper, we want to elaborate on the implications of such notion, by means of interconnecting it with other almost forgotten philosophical notions: *Individuum est ineffabile*, *Aestheticological* and *Poetic Instants* (Lehmann & Klempe, 2016).

## 2 “Pleromatization”: A Quest to Better Understand the Role of Emotions

The notion of pleromatization gives account of the oceanic or expansive perceptions we have upon certain stimuli and the type of emotional arousal they evoke. According to Valsiner (2006), the notion of pleromatization cannot be understood unless it is related to that of schematization. That is, the pleroma of experience would evoke the ocean, a holistic approach, while the schemas or experience could be drops of this ocean. The processes of pleromatization and schematization are both parts of the semiotic process of meaning-making of experiences. To apply Peirce’s terms, a schematized understanding is a felt conformity between a belief and the experienced reality, whereas pleromatization indicates the vastness of such experienced reality in itself. The evocative qualities of the intensity in which we embrace human experience bring us towards a question that has been dilemmatic for all psychology: that of integrating emotions into our theorizations.

*Feelings, affects, and emotions* are at the core in these nuances of our meaning-making process. Valsiner follows up Peirce’s stand, holding on to feelings as the leading guide in evaluating the conformity between a belief and the reality. Yet the crucial question is to sort out the differences between the three terms “feeling,” “affect,” and “emotion.” As far as we can see, Valsiner uses these terms in line with some historical factors. “Emotion” is a relatively new term, introduced by the British Empiricists as one of those terms that reflects the aim of making psychological terms more physical by emphasizing “movement outwards” (Richards, 1989, p. 79). Back then, it replaced the term “passion,” which used to be the general term (see, e.g., Locke, 1651/2014). In this article, it is used as a generic term including both feelings and affects. In his ground-breaking article “What is an emotion,” William James (1884) slightly made a distinction between “emotion” and “feelings” when he claimed, “the only emotions I propose expressly to consider are those

that have a distinct bodily expression” (p. 189), and he followed up by saying, “there are feelings of pleasure and displeasure” (p. 189). This combination of a bodily expression and feelings is in line with Kant’s understanding of feelings as standing in opposition to cognition (Kant, 2002), which also guided the German experimental psychologists, and partly Pierce as well. This is also the way it is used here: It refers to the inarticulate bodily reaction to something unexpected. Affect, on the other hand, can be understood in the light of music theory from the age of the Enlightenment, in which the ideal was to make music that moves the audience into certain and specified affect (Bach, 1949). That is, feelings represent more undifferentiated processes, whereas affects refer to a more specific emotional state as we involve our higher psychological functions to make sense of feelings.

Valsiner (2007) brings the nuanced differences in content of these terms a step further by introducing the notion of hypergeneralization. This notion gives account of the possibilities and boundaries of language to give account of the intensity of an affective loading. In his own words: “This entails emergence of feeling fields that overtake the person’s psyche” (Valsiner, 2007, p.314). This is the overwhelming state that appears in great experiences of art, for example. Yet the point here is that this mental process of hypergeneralization can be explained by neither the undifferentiated experiences of a feeling nor a rational and verbalized state of an emotional category. On this basis, “hypergeneralization” explains the process in which emotional aspects invade and govern higher cognitive functions and sometimes even almost subvert some aspects of rationality. Thus, Valsiner concludes, “*human rationality is profoundly irrational*” (p. 314, italics added). The best example of how emotional aspects invade higher cognitive functions is values. Most of us might honor the experience of love and yet struggle to put into words the ways in which this experience of love is embraced. Love, as other values embedded in our intellectual efforts are charged with emotions, which challenge verbalizations in a satisfying way.

### ***Individuum Est Ineffabile***

Valsiner borrows the notion of “pleromatization” from the theory of art, where it is used to describe a phenomenon in painting, in which a detail appears as “more rich [...] in detail than its original object” (Valsiner, 2006, p. 2). This stands in opposition to “schematization,” which refers to cases where the painted detail is less rich than the original object. The implications of this notion for cultural psychology are, according to Valsiner (2006), that they inform about how our everyday experiences are internalized through semiotic mediation, beyond a mere cognitive processing of information. At the bottom line, pleromatization can be compared with the apparently mysterious old phrase, *Individuum est ineffabile* – the individual is inexpressible (Mathisen, 2005, p.192). It is hard to tell the origin of this proposition. Most likely, it can be traced back to Aristotle, who states in the *Rhetoric*, “individual cases are so infinitely various that no systematic knowledge of them is possible”

(Aristotle, 1964/2010, p. 10, I.2). Consequently, Aristotle did not formulate the proposition itself; he just formulated the ground on which it is based.

The fact that this statement appears in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is not a random coincidence. This thesis discusses issues that go beyond Aristotle's theory of knowledge and logic. Consequently, the *Rhetoric* is about seduction, feelings, and non-valid inferences. The quotation above touches the latter, as it has logical implications. According to the Aristotelian *Organon*, logic is in principle about general valid statements, definitions, delineation, and categorization. These factors form the basis for valid deductive inferences, in which the premise forms an undisputable general statement. The case at stake presupposes a clear categorization (schematization) before a general conclusion for the case can be drawn. In contrast to this, the proposition, *Individuum est ineffabile*, says the opposite: As long as a case is not delineated and subsumed under a clear category, it is in fact inexpressible, and according to Aristotle, it cannot provide or form a basis for any systematic knowledge. Conversely, pleromatization is to honor the possibilities and boundaries of language to give account of the intensity and complexity of the affective nuances we experience in our everyday lives (Lehmann, 2018).

This way of reasoning changed along with the European history of ideas. In the renaissance, some scholars started doubting any clear distinction between logic and rhetoric. This doubt included also the notion of an unclear distinction between deductions and inductions, which the British humanist Francis Bacon pledged for in his *New Organon* (2000) published in 1620. These philosophical changes opened up for individuality and subjectivity, to which the expression *Individuum est ineffabile* was envisaged to serve as a proposition. Thus, during the enlightenment in the eighteenth century, the proposition's meaning changed from being a deficit during the Middle Ages to become a benefit in the modernity, as it in fact expressed the current ideal of focusing on the individual and subjectivity. On this basis, it represented an ideal and a guiding rule for Goethe, which he explicitly refers to in a letter in the late 1770s (Niekerk, 1995). His novel from 1774, *The Sorrow of Young Werther*, is sometimes referred to as one of the first novels, in which the reader follows just one individual person in details. Thus, this novel may count as an example from literature, in which just focusing on an individual is more than enough to fill a comprehensive and complete book.

This proposition forms in many ways a guiding rule for much thinking in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is also associated with Hegel's focus on the aspect of subjectivity in his dialectics (Appel, 2017). In this perspective, it depicts one aspect of the dialectic processing of subjectivity and objectivity – between a particular sensation and its representation through a generalized term. This is also the case in the hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey (1989). Moreover, when he referred to the proposition, it was a way to exemplify how hermeneutics can be related to psychology, by connecting the individual to its socio-historical reality:

The immensity of this psychophysical whole, of which the immensity of nature is ultimately only one part, can be lucidated through the analysis of the world representations: a particular perception is formed from sensations and representations, but regardless of the wealth of elements of which it may consist, it enters as one element into the conscious

process of connecting and separating representations. And this singularity of every such individual who acts at some point or other of the vast spiritual cosmos can, in accordance with the proposition *individuum est ineffabile*, be traced back to its particular components. (Dilthey, 1989, p. 81)

This proposition, therefore, can be regarded as a kind of precursor to Valsiner's thesis (2007) saying that a cognitive differentiation process includes at the same time a process of de-differentiation. A particular perception reflects at the same time its context, which is unlimited. Although it is possible to sort out an individual as an abstract (schematized) entity, the individual cannot be discerned apart from its socio-historical reality, which is in the end inexpressible (pleromatized).

### 3 Aestheticological: A Bridge Between Inferior and Superior Cognitive Functions

The second historical term that may shed some light on the aspect of pleromatization is the aestheticological. This is a term that has almost never been followed up after Alexander Baumgarten launched it in the first volume of a series of books entitled *Aesthetica* (Baumgarten, 1750/2007). He just completed two volumes of this series, as he died just the year before the second volume was published in 1758. He is famous for having revolutionized theories of art by launching the term "aesthetics" and by relating the beauty in art to sensation instead of cognition. However, his contributions go far beyond this. The two volumes are just focusing on art as examples, as the aim of the whole series was to develop a complete philosophical system in which sensation is united with cognition within the tradition of rationalism. The core term in this is "psychology," which his tutor, Christian Wolff, had included as a core term in metaphysics in 1732 (Klempe, 2020). The short version of this relationship is that Baumgarten basically replaced the term "psychology" with the term "aesthetics" to emphasize the role of sensation in a process of cognition.

In line with this, Baumgarten did launch not only the term "aestheticological" but also the proposition "aestheticological truth":

Aestheticological truth is either a general notion, a general judgment, or the singular and its idea. The former two represent general aestheticological truths, whereas the latter represent a singular aestheticological truth. (Baumgarten, 1750/2007 p. 416-417/§440)

As Baumgarten explains in the prior paragraph (§439), to grasp an experience properly, a sensed object has to be united with the process of cognition, in which the totality creates an impression of the beauty of the whole experience. Thus, feelings are embedded, and they form a kind of warranty for creating a proper impression of the actual experience. The notion of pleromatization evokes, similar to that of the aestheticological, an interdependence between emotional and cognitive processes, which requires from us, scientist, to befriend artistic expressions as resources that expand our understanding of the human mind (Klempe & Lehmann, 2016). This has

been, after all one of Vygotsky's innermost quest, that of making aesthetic and artistic experiences a resource for us to better understand and explore higher cognitive functions (Lehmann, 2018).

## 4 Poetic Instants

The notion of poetic instants was introduced by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1932/2013) and also recognized by the Mexican Nobel Prize Laureate Octavio Paz (1956/1994). It describes the moment in which the chronological time is subverted and turns into an experienced abruption. However, the subjective focus is not directed towards the rupture, but what the moment is filled up with. Consequently, it represents a moment where an abundance of imaginations are concentrated and experienced as being present at the same time. One way to understand this is by turning the sequential chronological time into a dense vertical moment where the intensity in which we embrace some nuances of our everyday lives: an intensity which shapes our higher cognitive functions by facilitating or obstructing meaning-making, decision-making, and value-adding (Lehmann, 2019).

This notion recalls both a phenomenological understanding of temporality and an expansive intuition of the emotional intensity that some experiences evoke. The poetic quality of an instant stands in an emotional arousal that in itself does not erase but rather reconciles the tensions that form our existence, conveying a spark of beauty in it (Lehmann, 2018). Poetic instants can be motivational and foster insight. As Octavio Paz (1956/1994) even argued, every human being can experience the poetic of an instant, even though not all of us devote ourselves to writing about them, as poets would do. That is, the notion of poetic instant claims in itself the pleromatization of experience and indicates the hypergeneralized levels of higher cognitive functions that Valsiner (2007) also describes.

In relation to affective processing, which the realms of pleromatization of experiences such as poetic instants indicate, are the richness of some physiological arousals and our experiences of values such as love (Branco and Valsiner 2010), which surpasses the conventional capacities of language. Therefore, the poetics of an instant in themselves recall the quest of poets for finding nuances that configure landscapes of experiences, images, and configurations that transcend the schematic quality of words.

## 5 Conclusions

The idea of the pure reason, which excludes emotions as a factor, has dominated scientific thinking in Western civilization. Thus, bringing in the aspect of emotions as a core aspect of cognition is disturbing this ideal. However, Jaan Valsiner is definitely one of those scholars who have challenged this ideal. In line with this, the

term “pleromatization” forms a gateway to understand some parts of the psychological processes in which feelings and cognition are united. The historical proposition *Individuum est ineffabile*, adopted by Goethe and Wilhelm Dilthey, points in the same direction, and so do Baumgarten’s “aesthetological” and Bachelard’s “poetic instants.” Moreover, the three propositions bring in a vertical dimension, which explains how feelings and cognition merge. Valsiner’s term “hypergeneralization” does the same, but from another angle. So when all these terms are put together, they open up for a broader understanding of how emotional aspects intervene cognition.

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# The *Vorbild* in Donor Portraits and Cultural Psychology



Lucas B. Mazur

Bilder können sich auf Vergangenes oder Zukünftiges beziehen. Im Sinne dieser Unterscheidung sind Vorbilder stets Zukunftsbilder: Sie vergegenwärtigen, was noch nicht da ist, als Entwürfe, Prophezeiungen, Befehle. Vorbilder erinnern nicht, sie nehmen vorweg, sie evozieren, sie rufen ins Leben. (Macho, 2011)

(Images can relate to the past or the future. In the sense of this distinction, *Vorbilder* are always images of the future: They make present what is not yet there as plans, prophecies, commands. *Vorbilder* don't remember, they anticipate, they evoke, they bring to life.)

The notion of the *Vorbild* presented above is a particularly useful starting point for the reflections to follow. The term is the combination of *vor* (before) and *Bild* (image) and is usually translated as *role model*, *exemplar*, or *ideal*. A role model, as “a person whose behavior in a particular role is imitated by others” (Webster’s Dictionary, n.d.), evokes the hoped-for future of the observer. When the likeness of such a person is captured on an inspiring image, we have not only the image of a role model before us (a *Vorbild*) but also an image (*Bild*) before (*vor*) us that itself evokes the future. This double meaning of *Vorbild* can be usefully applied to the art form known as the *donor portrait*, a painting presenting historic religiously significant persons, places, objects, or events to which the likeness of an anachronistic person (often someone alive at the time the image was produced), has been added. It will be argued that the donor portrait, with a contemporary person portrayed alongside a holy or divine figure, attests to several key aspects of cultural psychology. What is more, the donor portrait sets a catalytic example for the viewer for the contemplation of mortality and salvation. In this sense, by means of cultural

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psychological processes, both the donor represented on the portrait and the donor portrait itself constitute a *Vorbild* for the viewer.

Below, we begin by briefly discussing the donor portrait and, more particularly, a subcategory of donor portraits known as *contact portraits*. We will then explore how cultural psychology is particularly helpful in explicating the nature of such contact portraits and, inversely, how contact portraits, by their very nature, illustrate cultural psychological processes. For example, we will examine how cultural psychological understandings of catalysis, irreversible time, and the uniqueness of psychological experience and of the empirical data resulting therefrom suggest that the “doing” of contact portraits is inherently the “doing” of cultural psychology. We will end by reflecting on a particular figure in the field of cultural psychology and on how he—by his pious need to see, his *Schaufrömmigkeit*—has himself become, in both his work and his person, a historically grounded and future-oriented *Vorbild* for others.

## 1 Donor Portraits and Contact Portraits

Donor portraits have a long history, and they can vary considerably in style depending on why they were made, when they were made, and where they were made. For this reason, the category of paintings generally referred to as donor portraits in fact includes a number of subcategories, such as *coronation portraits*, *true donor portraits*, and *contact portraits* (Franses, 2018). The name itself, donor portrait, can be understood in several ways. For example, the “donor” can refer to the person painted into the religious scene as the funder or commissioner of the painting (thus, donating the image), but it can also refer to that figure presenting the holy figure depicted on the painting with a gift (Franses, 2018). Franses (2018) argues that a *true donor portrait* necessarily depicts such an explicit act of gift giving. This definition draws a distinction between true donor portraits and similarly appearing images that are often also thought of as donor portraits, such as coronation portraits, where royalty are displayed alongside God the Father, Christ, Mary, or the Holy Family. A central feature of coronation portraits is the temporal power of the ruler. The ruler is depicted in a manner that suggests power (e.g., the wealth of their clothing or an upright, powerful stance), while their position vis-à-vis the holy or divine figure indicates the divine either as the source of their power or as providing a divine seal of approval. Franses (2018) also identifies a category of donor portraits that he calls *contact portraits*. Within contact portraits, the anachronistic figure is not necessarily presenting the religious person with a gift (although that might be the case), but is primarily humbling him or herself before the divine. In other words, while the anachronistic figure on a true donor portrait is necessarily a donor of some kind, the person added to the contact portrait is necessarily a supplicant. The supplicant is humbling him- or herself before Christ, God the Father, or Mary, in an attempt to contact the divine. What is more, as will be argued below, the viewer of the contact portrait is invited to engage in this act of communion, not as a third-party observer,

but as a supplicant him- or herself. Thus, while the historical study of contact portraits can tell us much about the economic and social conditions that led to the commission of the portrait (e.g., who is depicted on the painting, who commissioned the painting, when the painting was made), a cultural psychological approach is needed in order to explicate the meaning-making processes that lie at the core of contact portraits.

## 2 Culture Is to Psychology as Contact Is to Portrait

Cultural psychologists argue that culture is not a secondary, but rather a primary, feature of human psychology. Similarly, they argue that culture is not an essentializable variable that can be isolated and placed within predictive causal chains, but is rather a dynamic process that can only be observed in practice (Bruner, 1990; Shweder, 1990; Valsiner, 2014). Culture is not an independent variable apart from other psychological processes, but is the process of meaning-making itself. In like manner, in order to understand the contact portrait, the notion of contact must not be understood as a secondary feature of the piece, but must be seen as lying at its core. This contact with the divine can also not be understood in essentialized ways, for example, as somehow locked into the gift giving or the act of supplication. Rather, the contact can only be meaningfully understood when seen as a dynamic process involving various elements of the portrait, as well as the active participation of the viewer. What is more, this contact is not with the piece of art, but with the Divine as facilitated by the piece of art. Thus, while *culture* and *contact* are generally thought of as adjectives or qualifiers within the terms *cultural psychology* or *contact portraits*, they are actually of central importance to both. Just as culture is constitutive of human psychology and not something existing independently “outside” of it, so too is the notion of contact constitutive of the contact portrait and not somehow an additional, external variable added to it.

## 3 Cultural Psychology and Donor Portraits

In order to understand contact portraits, one is in effect required to “do” cultural psychology. Similarly, cultural psychology, particularly in its semiotic form (Valsiner, 2014), is particularly useful for explicating the “doing” of contact portraits. We now examine several ways in which donor portraits, and more specifically contact portraits, exemplify important ideas from semiotic cultural psychology.

Semiotic cultural psychology is in large part the study of how signs interact with other signs to create new signs (Valsiner, 2007, 2014). When understood in this way, the meaning of any given sign cannot be fully understood in isolation, but must be seen holistically within the broader setting. The donor depicted on the contact portrait usually represents a wealthy and powerful ruler, however, their supplication

before the divine or holy figure suggests not only a deep and thorough awareness of their precarious position as a mortal being, but also their explicit acknowledgment of that fundamental fragility and their explicit prayer for divine aid. Similarly, the holy scene or figure on the painting, in being depicted alongside an anachronistic figure, highlights the importance and ongoing relevance of the past for the present. As the meaning of a given sign should be interpreted relationally and in its wider context, shifts or variations in one sign can be expected to change the nature of neighboring signs. Within contact portraits, the use of different biblical scenes suggests differing meanings of the painted embodiment of supplication (i.e., the praying figure; Franses, 2018; Scheel, 2013). Scenes of Christ's birth might suggest joy and praise, while images of the resurrection might suggest more direct reflection on the power of life over death, and depictions of the cross may awaken an awareness of sin, sorrow, suffering, and sacrifice on the part of the supplicant. Thus, within cultural psychology, this interaction of signs and their emergent properties is not of purely academic concern, it is not of interest to semiotically minded cultural psychologists alone, but is understood to regulate the psychological lives of the people who engage with them (Valsiner, 2014, 2019). This is very clearly seen in the case of contact portraits, as the viewer is an integral part of the sign field (Valsiner, 2007, 2014). The donor and the portrait are a *Vorbild* for the viewer in that they provide an exemplar for the act of supplication. These portraits are thus part of the religious tradition of *Schaufrömmigkeit* (the pious desire to see), whereby prayer is accompanied and variously catalyzed by visual representations of religious motifs (Fehr et al., 2011; Morgen, 1998; Scheel, 2011; Wenzel, 1995). However, this desire to see is pious, lest it indicate a form of incredulity, a demand for physical, visible proof as demanded by “doubting Thomas” (see Fig. 1).

What is important to highlight at this point is that contact portraits *catalyze* the pious engagement of the viewer, but they do not *cause* that prayerful state. Thus, contact portraits illustrate another central aspect of cultural psychology, namely, the catalytic properties of signs (Cabell & Valsiner, 2014). This understanding of catalysis fits the holistic nature of the interaction between signs within a given sign field and avoids treating any given sign as a variable that can be understood in isolation and subsequently plugged into larger causal chains. Just how contact portraits catalyze prayerful reflection can be seen in the example of Dutch contact portraits from the late medieval period. While Dutch painters of that time could masterfully capture human emotion, the faces of the supplicants on contact portraits are often depicted without emotion (Scheel, 2012, 2013). While the faces of other figures on the portrait may show a wide range of emotions, the supplicant's blank expression suggests a *vacatio spiritualis*, a productive emptiness that suggests its opposite, namely, a powerful—but not predetermined—emotional experience on the part of the viewer (Scheel, 2011, 2013). When looking at the supplicant depicted within the powerful religious scene, the viewer would be perceiving an emotionally powerful experience. That the face of the supplicant is emotionally blank suggests a tension that can only be resolved by the emotional experience of the viewer, an intense experience at that, irrespective of its exact emotional content (see Fig. 2).



**Fig. 1** Peter Paul Rubens' seventeenth-century *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* or the *Rockox Triptych*. The donors need not “see” in the same way as “doubting Thomas”

The active participation of the viewer evoked by the *vacatio spiritualis*, the supplicant's emotional expressionlessness, highlights the uniqueness of each act of prayer. The unique experience of the viewer is thus an essential part of the portrait (Fehr et al., 2011). The representation of the donor or donors within the context of well-known biblical scenes or alongside well-known biblical figures underscores the individuality of life precisely because of the evident contrast with the timelessness of the biblical message. The individuality of the supplicant is a striking feature of contact portraits, especially in that he or she stands out against the well-known surroundings. Similarly, the role of the viewer highlights the central role of unique, unrepeatability experience in as far as that individual experience is evoked by active participation in the painting, whatever the exact nature of the experience might be.

The uniqueness of the viewer's experience, like the exaggerated uniqueness of the supplicant depicted on the portrait, is fundamentally related to the temporal nature, and ultimate mortality, of both. That all of creation exists within the irreversible flow of time is an important aspect of semiotic cultural psychology (Valsiner, 2002, 2014). This builds on the earlier recognition that each moment is fundamentally unique and unrepeatability (e.g., Driesch, 1925) and constitutes a serious challenge to claims of experimental replicability and the reproducibility of experimental conditions, precisely because all psychological “data” are inherently unique (Valsiner, 2014). Pointing to the semiotic flexibility and variability of even the simplest of things, and thus arguing against simplistic realism within cultural psychology, Ernst Boesch similarly argued for the centrality of polyvalence within our psychological lives. Poetically polemicizing with such claims to the stability and universality of meaning found in such statements as “a rose is a rose is a rose,” he wrote that “a broom is a broom is a broom,” by which he meant that even the



**Fig. 2** Cornelis Engelbrechtsz's (c. 1462–1527) *The Crucifixion with Donors and Saints Peter and Margaret*

simplices of things take on different meanings in different situations and at different times (cited in Straub & Weidemann, 2007, p. xlix).

The irreversible flow of time becomes a matter of deep concern to the extent that we know not whether it is flowing. Human meaning-making processes involve an awareness of the flow of time, in that these semiotic dynamics both regulate psychological processes in the present moment and actively project that semiotic meaning into the future (Valsiner, 2002, 2014). Despite the fact that positivistic psychology remains unable to predict human behavior with any considerable degree of statistical accuracy, people generally feel that they are living relatively predictable lives even in the face of the challenges of time and the uniqueness of experience. Scholars have argued that this is possible because people generally do not sit passively back attempting to predict important aspects of their lives but, rather, that they take what Jan Smedslund (2016) calls “an active stance” in the predictive process. In other words, the projection of semiotic meaningfulness involves our active engagement in the process. Semiotic cultural psychology involves the study of such active meaning-making processes, not passive predictions. While this study is not limited to any particular kind of experience, cultural psychologists tend to explore examples from everyday life (Valsiner, 2019). By way of contrast, contact portraits are concerned with what is perhaps the most pressing concern in human history, the attempt to find meaning in the flow of our passing lives and to do so in the face of a future that lies

over the horizon of our mortality. While we may try our best to hide from such religious and metaphysical concerns in the contemporary West (Walter, 2020), this was certainly the main explicit concern of the societies in which contact portraits were produced (Franses, 2018). Cultural psychological processes suggest how people semiotically regulate their psychological lives in the present in such a way that allows that semiotic meaningfulness to serve as a type of solid ground on which we can confidently walk into the unknown future. These processes can be acutely observed in true engagement with a contact portrait, in the process of which both the donor and the donor portrait serve as a catalytic *Vorbild* for the active viewer.

#### 4 Jaan Valsiner: A *Vorbild* in Cultural Psychology

The donor depicted on the donor portrait, especially in the case of contact portraits, invites the viewer to actively engage in communion with the divine. The portrait speaks to the vision of the supplicant, but in a way that invites the viewer into that vision—not in the third person, but in the first person. It is in this sense that both the contact portrait and the supplicant depicted on the portrait can be thought of as a *Vorbild*. The image before us depicts multilayered and interwoven semiotic elements that regulate the current psychological processes of the viewer while simultaneously evoking the future, *our* future as observers. This future becomes intelligible to the extent that we engage in the portrait's dynamics ourselves. The painting does not force us to do so, but it provides us with the catalytic elements for such meaningful engagement.

A similar set of dynamics can be seen in the case of cultural psychology. Cultural psychology can be understood as a purely “academic” undertaking, but it can also be understood as involving the researcher in the first person, and it is in this sense that cultural psychology becomes deeply and personally meaningful. Much like the donor and the donor portrait, the cultural psychologist and cultural psychology can serve as a future-evoking *Vorbild*. A wonderful example of this can be found in the work and the person of Jaan Valsiner.

Jaan's body of scholarly work is incredibly large, broad in scope, wide in reach, and of a unique depth. This includes his work as a researcher, a writer, an editor, a speaker, a mentor, and an overall connector of people and ideas. In this regard, Jaan's incredible productivity as a scholar is certainly an exemplar to follow. Importantly, however, Jaan is also himself a living example of deep, honest engagement with culture—an example that serves as a *Vorbild* for others. The person whose voice we read on the pages of his texts, that we hear at the podium, or that we see before us in the flesh also inspires others in this way. Jaan is a living example of his understanding of creative semiotic dynamics, whereby signs interact with others signs to create news signs. He engages with anyone and everyone who will do so, and he does so as a partner. Much like the supplicant of the contact portrait, Jaan catalyzes the engagement of others in their own exploration of culture, but he does not determine the way they do so. He has his own, very distinct understanding of

cultural psychology as the study of semiotic dynamics, but he is open to the ideas of others, even those that are very different from his own. Not only is he open to the ideas of others, however different from his own they may be, but he is actively supportive of them. Despite his intimidating academic credentials and output, despite the intimidating complexity of his thought, and despite even his intimidating physical size, Jaan is simply not intimidating. Rather, the powerful impression he makes constitutes an encouraging, supportive, and uplifting voice, a voice that one begins to hear as one's own. His ostensibly intimidating person is in this regard much like the clearly high status position of the donor depicted on the donor portrait, who, after first wowing the viewer with their presence, slips quietly from view to the extent that we see ourselves in that role.

Jaan's unique combination of endless curiosity and deep humility can perhaps best be described as a form of *Schaufrömmigkeit*, a pious need to see. He explicitly reminds us that within cultural psychology "all inquiry starts from looking" (Valsiner, 2012). Much like the donor portrait, his cultural psychology is grounded in a deep and thorough historical awareness, but it is nevertheless focused on the present, with an eye to the future. Within the context of the donor portrait, *Schaufrömmigkeit* includes the mirror effect discussed above, whereby the viewer of the portrait sees the supplicant on the painting praying before the divine, an act of seeing that catalyzes a deep and personal engagement in that same process on the part of the viewer. The emotionlessness of the painted figure grants the viewer the freedom to experience a deeper and wider range of emotions on their own than they would if the emotional direction and depth were already fixed on the image. The parallels between this pious need to see and the example set by Jaan are striking. His need to see is infectious, but his humility presents that curiosity as a type of mirror by which we are encouraged to a *Schaufrömmigkeit* of our own. To understand his example is to engage in the process of cultural exploration oneself. In this sense, Jaan's example cannot be understood on the basis of Jaan alone, but arises in interaction with the voices of others. His invitation to cultural psychology necessarily involves the other because that invitation comes as much in the form of listening as in speaking. His *Vorbild*, emerging from dynamic interaction with others, is itself a thoroughly cultural psychological phenomenon. Jaan provides a living example of what he calls semiotic *ontopotentiality*—the ongoing dynamic and creative interaction of signs (Valsiner, 2002). This Festschrift has arisen from just such a process, a process to which Jaan has served as a catalyst. However, this collection of essays only hints at the effect Jaan has had on our lives beyond the pages of the book.

The semiotic processes that regulate our psychological lives in the present are intimately linked with concern for the future, with concern for the unknown. Hence, the *Vorbild* evokes not just a dynamic, forward-oriented semiotic process, but it is inherently elevating in the sense that it allows us to move into that future with a degree of meaningfulness and even confidence and hope. Jaan Valsiner is to be lauded not only for his sharp intellect, for his uniquely creative and constructive ideas, and for his hard work and dedication to the field. He should also be recognized for the ways in which he elevates those around him. We are all tremendously fortunate to have his humble but powerful example.

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# Intimacy in Irreversible Time: Poetic Genesis as a Special Case of Boundary Dynamics



Emily Abbey and Ana Cecília Bastos

*Your book creates for me a boundary space,  
between life and art,  
amidst the USA and Brazil,  
between mothers and daughters, among picture and word.  
The essence ... is itself not something singular or safe,  
But which seems to hold more movement than many  
of the poems.  
From many authors and languages.  
This boundary space is something to cherish.  
For me, it is as if the poem,  
itself is the boundary of so many things,  
can finally find a home in your book.  
—Personal communion*

*Emily Abbey to Ana Cecília Bastos*

## 1 Introduction

Human lives are made beautiful in many ways. One of these is through deeply felt affective experiences. Sometimes thought of as states, such as “being in love,” in fact, affective experience emerges through a process of relating with the world. This process is dynamic and complex and occurs within the irreversible flow of time. One cannot simply “be in love” as a static state, but rather, love as an affective experience is a continually emerging experience, one that is continually developing—even if it maintains even a similar form for a period of time.

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This is because humans live within an irreversible flow of experience. Bergson (1913) describes this as the concept of duration of the ego through life experience. Just as a snowball rolling through snow shapeshifts at each movement, personal life experiences are never repeated. This is true even if the event holds a superficial similarity to the past and the event is seemingly mundane, such as a daily routine activity or repeated behavior. In this sense, human lives are lived in an irreversible flow. One of the key axioms that underlines the field of cultural psychology is that there can be no sameness in human lives. And as such, the notion that humans develop in an elongated and stable “present moment” is axiomatically impossible.

For humans, development takes place at the boundary of the barely knowable here and now and the immediately arriving next moment. As such, when humans use signs to make meaning about their environment, the sign has both a *representational* sense and a *presentational* sense. Signs reference *what is*, in the infinitesimally small here and now, but they simultaneously imagine *what could be* in the unknown next moment (Josephs et al., 1999). There is an *ambivalence* between “what is” and “what could be” in the future because each is going to be different from one another, and development occurs as the person works to overcome this tension (Abbey & Valsiner, 2004).

Development is, in this way, a necessarily future-oriented process as the person tries to resolve the ambivalences. The meaning we make in our lives is dynamic and ever-changing and flows like the music of an improvisation of a jazz musician. A jazz improvisation as a composition maintains a feeling of unity within its ambiguity, and so do our thoughts in irreversible time. Our thoughts from the past are linked to the future through our imagined notions of what could happen, and yet nonetheless, we cannot say at the start of the song exactly what will be played and what feel the music will have as it develops. Ambiguity is a part of all improvisation, within jazz and human meaning making (Abbey, 2012). Just as the jazz musician creates music at the boundary of the note just played, and the one that may come next, the person making meaning acts at the boundary of the barely known here and now and the possibly next moment. All meaning making is a boundary-focused activity.

Herbst (1995) significantly advanced the theoretical foundation of how boundaries act as sites of emergence, developing a triadic logic. Specifically, making a distinction does not create two disjointed and independent units. Rather, a distinction acts as the basis for the development of a triadic unit containing three aspects that come into being inseparably and on the basis of one another: the distinguished inside, the distinguished outside, and the boundary between them (Herbst, 1995). This logic underlies the metaconceptual framework of inclusive separation (Valsiner, 1998). As seen below (Fig. 1), the semi-permeable boundary is what allows both the person (P) and the environment (E) to come into being.

**Fig. 1** Boundaries based on the metaconceptual framework of inclusive separation



As seen in this example, though the person and environment are distinct entities, they function as a dynamic system. So too for the mind and body and self and other: Each needs the other, and they exist *through processes of relating with the other*.

Studying emergent phenomena of any sort is challenging, for inquiry of this nature requires explaining that which is not yet in existence using only two pieces of information: that which is known and that which is expected (Valsiner, 2001, p. 53). As understood in this quote, emergent phenomena occur at the boundary of time, between the moment here and now (the known) and the next moment, which we cannot know, but only anticipate (that which is expected). This reality means boundary processes must be the central focus if we are to understand a process-based understanding of how phenomena develop through time.

In this paper, we consider the affective experience of intimacy, as an emergent process. Intimacy understood as a deeply felt openness and connection can occur in numerous instances. For our needs, we would like to have examples that allow us to explore the boundary processes involved in its emergence. As such, we will explore poetry, as well as breastfeeding one's child. By adopting this, we will see that the emergence of intimacy requires a special case of boundary dynamics, between the I<>other and public<>private spheres of existing. Specifically, during an intimate moment, we note *hyperfluctuations* in the I<>other and public<>private boundaries as the person overcomes their ambivalence. We use the notion of *poetic genesis* to represent this special case of boundary dynamics.

## 2 Understanding Intimacy

Intimacy, according to Giddens (1992), is where the dilemma of the self is expressed in the context of modernity. Although Giddens analyzes the concept of pure relationship in couples, closely connected to sexuality, his approach on the idea of pure relationship stands here as a parameter to analyze different kinds of relationships. Let's consider the poet in the face of his still invisible reader, fighting with a world of words when intensely experiencing his own feelings and writing a poem. It is relevant as it suggests relevant dimensions to consider intimacy in a broader sense:

“A pure relationship is one in which external criteria have become dissolved: the relationship exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship can deliver. In the context of the pure relationship, trust can be mobilized only by a process of mutual disclosure.” (Giddens, 1992, p. 6)

Discussing the dialogic nature of poetry, Dolack (2014) claims that the poem is private, concerning self-reflection and self-expression; still, it carries an inherent adhesivity—an awareness of the listener or interlocutor and an anticipation of other voices, minds, or responses. This is beautifully exposed by the poet Paul Celan:

“The poem wants to reach an Other, it needs this Other, it needs an Over-against. It seeks it out, speaks toward it. (...) The poem, while being a form of expression of language, and by essence dialogic, is like a bottle thrown on the sea, left to the hope to be, one day, be found

in a distant beach – maybe in the beach of the heart. In this sense, the poems are a road: they go ahead toward a destiny (...) to an open place, to an untouchable you.” (apud Dolack, 2014, p. 68)

In this sense, poems travel and overcome time and space. A poem written centuries ago reaches the poetic experience of the reader today. This is poetic motion (Abbey, 2012) at the atemporal, supra-personal time, transcending day-to-day interactions. Still, it entails a close I<>other relationship. The Brazilian poet Murilo Mendes condenses this experience in these verses:

I write to make myself invisible  
To lose the key to the abyss.

The poet hides and, at the same time, longs to make radically public what is his/her most intimate experience—even if to unknown people, even if in the future, and even if the abyss is beyond his own time and circumstances. He wants to make himself invisible—so to say, free of any immediate circumstances—but he also wants to be immortal: the key thrown in the abyss of the undefined future is personal, dialogues with eternity.

The poet engages in an intensive process of self-disclosure (Giddens, 1992) and, at the same time, in the process of self-condensation that allows for a shape to make public his/her experience—in the case of writing, through words. Take the following poem (Modesty A.C. Bastos):

### 3 Modesty

Someone crosses the threshold of intimacy.  
Where others would make up the clothes,  
I hide verses.

Poetry is about the visible (public) and the invisible (private) under tension, and that's why Freeman (2017) considers “living in verse” so difficult, even unlikely:

“there is a more of an oscillation involved; the world surges in at times and then recedes and retreats, covered over by this or that task or thought or preoccupation – a condition that I have referred as “ordinary oblivion”. For most of us, it is the default mode of being”. (p. 142)

### *Intimate Experience: Self-Disclosure and Self-Condensation in Poetry and Breastfeeding*

Two diverse contexts of intimacy matter for us here, both intensely involving movements at the boundary I<>other, named here as self-condensation and self-disclosure: the poet in front of the act of experiencing and writing a poem and the

mother who breastfeeds her first child. The poet addresses another beyond and within him/her—the poet within is a community of atemporal voices. For a poem to be born, there is some point when there are no words, and still there is the experience of the poem. The same can be said of the experience of breastfeeding, in some moments: there is a complete closeness without words. A whole world of affects and social directions come together into that moment assuming that mother and baby are connected physically and psychologically in breastfeed (self-condensation); at the same time, from the mother's perspective, a culturally oriented movement, which started during pregnancy and even before, taking into account gender socialization inputs since her childhood, allowing for her to disclose herself in front of her child.

The intimate experience should not be confounded with the idea of privacy. Here, we refer to the wholeness that the poet experiences and lives, when creating. The very act of creating is relational: through it, the writer dialogues with every voice that enters his/her universe, and in this aspect, poetry is not singular as a human experience. What makes the poetic a unique act is its location between public and private: something very intimate is publicized and, in part because of its own truth (revelation of what is so particular), reaches the reader or listener in his/her deep intimacy. Being the inner world quite free of temporal barriers, we could propose that the experience of creating a poem—going from an intense self-disclosure to the point of self-condensation—is unique in the measure as it conveys and touches atemporal signs and meanings.

Feeling and writing a poem and breastfeeding are affectively intense experiences. The first depends on words; for the second, maybe at the level of the pure experience, words are not required; by definition, it is a pre-word world.

For the poet, this affectively intense experience is beyond words; it comes from a whole world across the poet, demanding “his words and his blood,” like in Neruda's verses; it longs for being disclosed (a self-disclosure—disclosure from what is in time), and, for this to happen, it needs to be condensed in words (what is a self-condensation):

All through the earth join all the silent  
wasted lips and speak from the depths to me all this long night  
as if I were anchored here with you (...)  
Give me silence, water, hope.  
Give me struggle, iron, volcanoes.  
Fasten your bodies to me like magnets.  
Hasten to my veins to my mouth.  
Speak through my words and my blood.

The self-condensation (in words and in blood, i.e., through intense feeling) is opposite to Giddens' self-disclosure mechanism that characterizes the intimate experience.

#### 4 Intimacy as an Emergent Process: Ambivalence of I<>Other and Private<>Public Boundaries

To provide a dynamic account of the boundary work occurring during the affective experience of intimacy, we can look at the following lines from the poem "Aging" (E. Abbey):

##### **Aging**

My mother's feather thin white hair has grown into my scalp.

I feel her so close, near now as when I was babe on her chest.

As one begins with the line, "My mother's feather thin white hair has grown into my scalp," the inclusive separation of I <> other (self and mother) is evident. There is a representation of the "other" (here, the speaker's mother) and the "other's" hair as "thin" and "white." Hair is the beginning of the ambivalence within the poem, for though initially portrayed as hair that belongs to the "other," this ownership is simultaneously brought into question. The speaker (here representing the voice of "I") has the very same hair of the mother growing in her scalp. As this initial ambivalence is overcome, the I<>other boundary continues to fluctuate, for in the next line the speaker (again, "I") describes the transmission of feeling the "other" (the mother) "so close, now" which re-creates ambivalence in the I<>other relationship. This is because of the ambiguity entailed in the word "feeling" as it is used to mean either a tactile sensation or an emotion.

A next series of ambivalences arise in the I<>other boundary as that one is surmounted. In the line, "Near now as when I was babe on her chest," the speaker implies the "other" is "near now," while the "other" may not be there at all. In addition, the "I" may be present or may have lapsed back in time. It is as if a double-level ambivalence, one in which both I and other are both present and absent, simultaneously. And still there is another ambivalence to be overcome: that the "I" who was "just" in the previous line so "old" is positioned as a child and the "other" presumably considered by the reader to be an older-aged woman (on account of her "feather white hair") has become a young mother, with a bare chest holding the "I."

Note the numerous fluctuations already noted here, the rapid cycling of this I<>other boundary. The experience of intimacy also involves the rapid movement through ambivalence of the public<>private boundary. Looking again at the first line of the poem above, we begin with the notion of one's mother, which is a private feeling; perhaps, there is nothing more personal than one's own mother. A mother is even defined symbolically by giving life to the person through the inside of her body and through the area of her body that society makes explicit off limits to public view (the vaginal area). As the notion of "My mother" is introduced, coming with it is the ambivalent notion of hair. Hair is a public object, for it is not hidden like the "private" body parts. Moreover, it is the visible aspect of hair that allows it to be a symbol used for acts of resistance within the personal and collective cultural interactions within many societies, creating a public side to hair.

Immediately then, an ambivalence between the private<>public boundary arises, and it is simultaneously overcome and recreated, leading to a new fluctuation. The author writes, “the feather thin white hair has *grown into my scalp...*” So, with the sense of “my scalp,” we are now back in the realm of the private, and the previously “public” hair has now become part of the personal space. The deep ambivalence of hair as possibly both a public and private object, subject to heavy social suggestion and also personal meaning making, is what creates the opportunity for this ambivalence to occur.

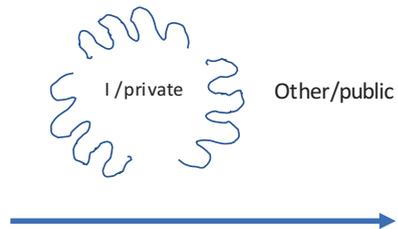
As the writer continues, the ambivalence grows. The poem continues “I feel her close now” as though she is present in what is not a hidden space, yet then immediately asserts “near now as when I was *babe on her chest.*” In these words, this is a cueing of the private boundary, for referencing a baby on a mother’s chest can recall the notion of breastfeeding. Due to the regulation of the breast as a private object (just as the vaginal area), the affective sense of privacy is in ambivalent relation to the otherwise public feeling of being “here, close now...” at the beginning of this line.

### Poetic Genesis as a Special Case of Boundary Dynamics

A hyper-poetic genesis operates here: Intimacy is a deeply affective experience, but to understand it as a process-based and dynamic activity within irreversible time, we need to look at the boundaries of time and understand the emergence of this affective state through the ambivalences of I<>other and private<>public boundary actions. As illustrated in Fig. 2, where one might often illustrate a boundary with a straight line—even if hyphenated to show a relation of inclusive separation—here the hyper-dynamicity is represented using a highly curvy line:

When the child is sucking on the nipple of the mother to breastfeed, this is literally the manipulation of the boundary in a similar manner. As mother and child are nursing, there is no question they are simultaneously individual and co-present, dynamically relating at the boundaries of private and public and I and other.

**Fig. 2** Intimacy:  
Hyperfluctuations at the  
boundary I-other and  
public-private



## 5 The Intimacy of Breastfeeding

We have challenging material here: poets use words—intensely affectively marked words that, by definition, go beyond words—and the wordless interaction of deep intimacy in breastfeeding. Of course, the mother of a firstborn dialogues with herself and her new role and reality as a mother. But within that dialogue, we find the singular dynamic of intimacy that lies within intimacy, as experienced when reading a poem or, here below, when breastfeeding a child: the poetic genesis of the I<>other and public<>private boundaries in rapid, ambivalent oscillations with one another through irreversible time.

### Ana's Breastfeeding Narrative

Breastfeeding occurs within a semiosphere that places redundant and often conflicting demands upon the mother of a new child: on one side, strong ideologies concerning health prescriptions (physical and psychological) as well as other moralist discourses regulating women's bodies—here directed to how, where, and when the women should breastfeed. This is just a small part of the woman's life, interacting with how she lives the transition to motherhood and deals with the many spheres of her experience at this point. Ambivalence is marked all over the process. She moves simultaneously through several demands in opposition. At the same time, there are the mother's own feelings about why and in what manner she chooses to breastfeed her baby.

Here we present comments from a narrative from Ana, mother to a new child (her baby daughter is 1 year old at the time of the interview). The interviewee, Ana, agrees to be identified by her own name. The interview is part of a broader Brazilian study on the cultural construction of motherhood, coordinated by the second author.<sup>1</sup> In this specific case, the participant focused on her experience when breastfeeding her first child. The narrative interview was recorded and the transcript analyzed. In these comments, she clearly expresses the ambivalences of I<>other and public<>private beliefs surrounding her experience of breastfeeding her child (even the words she uses mark the contrasts), as well as the intimacy that has grown between herself and her daughter.

Ana is personally committed to breastfeeding her daughter for a long period of time; it is something she deeply believes in doing. It's important to note that she has chosen to breastfeed her daughter for a period of time that extends longer than the traditional time period in her collective cultural context. This is, in fact, the nexus of the many ambivalences she faces between the public<>private and I<>other boundaries as she speaks about the process. But Ana makes very clear that no matter what adversity she may face, she finds the reality of breastfeeding her child “worthwhile” no matter what. She says: “All that we both live in these minutes that she's on my lap sucking, weighs more and makes it all worth it.”

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<sup>1</sup>Detailed information about this research project can be found in Bastos and Pontes (Eds) (2020) *Nascer não é igual para todas as pessoas*. Salvador, BA: EDUFBA; Cabell, K., Valsiner, J., Marsico, G. & Cornejo, C. (Eds.) (2015), *Making Meaning, Making Motherhood. Annals of cultural psychology*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, Vol 1.

### **Time Length of Breastfeeding**

This personal feeling that breastfeeding is worthwhile where the Private and I boundaries begin to appear, and they are strongly formed; Ana is committed to what she is doing for her child. As Ana continues to speak about what her friends and acquaintances say to her about the decision to breastfeed for this extended length of time, however, this is where the ambivalences on the public and Other sides of the boundaries also begin to arise.

To reconcile the demands of her familial, social, and professional life with her conviction to continue breastfeeding, Ana carries her baby everywhere she goes and often breastfeed her publicly. For continuing to breastfeeds for a long time, in her words, she remarks that close friends express surprise when they discover she is still breastfeeding her child. Ana says, “People ask me: You STILL breastfeed?!” The comments of her close friends reflect more than surprise though; they also more directly point to normative demands for action. She recounts how a friends said to her, “. . .Isn’t it time to stop [breastfeeding]?” It would appear this is a highly ambivalent boundary between I<>other and public<>private. To have one’s close friends and acquaintances speak about her deep personal convictions, and for Ana to recall verbatim these thoughts and continue to reflect upon them, maintains them within her personal cultural space. They impact her emerging experience as a mother..

### **Breast Milk**

Within this general critique about the length of time she has been breastfeeding her new daughter, Ana also receives more specific challenges to her personal and private experience. One set of such remarks has focused on the quality of her breast milk. Ana continues, describing that people remark “You still have milk?” and then even somewhat critically evaluating what the quality of her milk must be “This milk doesn’t feed more (sic), is just goeey.” This is likely a very poignant fluctuation within the public<>private and I<>other boundary, as only the mother (and her daughter) can know the quality of the milk which after all resides within the mother’s own breast. One comment goes so far as to even say that her child would eat more if she discontinued nursing her child, “If she stops breastfeeding, she will eat more.” One could assume this boundary fluctuation could be emotional for Ana and part of a deeply affective ambivalent experience.

### **Child Well-being**

Just as having the quality of one’s own breast milk critiqued by another could be conceptualized as a highly affective ambivalence between I<>other and private<>public boundaries, more so is it possible that the third category of comments Ana describes take on this character. Ana of course continues to breastfeed her daughter—making do despite having to endure critical comments from time to time when she must breastfeed in public as she takes her baby from place to place—because she believes she is doing the best thing she can for her daughter. Yet Ana’s acquaintances have also challenged the idea that what she is doing is not ideal for the well-being of her child in various ways. Ana recounts how social others have claimed that her child will be better rested if she stops her feeding practice: “If she stops breastfeeding, she will sleep better.” One of the primary concerns of many

mothers is that her child receives adequate rest, along with nutrition, and so it is likely this comment is creating ambivalence for Ana. Social others have also made comments that suggest the extended nursing has decreased the budding independence of Ana's young daughter: "She is very dependent on you." and "She only wants Mommy..." It's difficult to imagine how strong the ambivalence that the boundaries in question might be here with these comments. After all, the very nature of the breastfeeding relationship is one of connection, of intimacy. This is a highly personal feeling, and when social others try to regulate such a highly personal experience, it is often deeply painful.

There is a paragraph in Ana's narrative where we really see all the ambivalence she faces expressed in real time. She says:

Yes ... breastfeeding is a very ambivalent experience. There are the pain[s] (sic) (I don't particularly feel any physical pain) and the delights of breastfeeding. There's a lot of exchange of affection, but there's also prejudice and criticism, especially with prolonged breastfeeding, and lack of support and information.

Parsing out this snippet of text, it's possible to see the rapid oscillation of boundaries. Ana remarks that there is pain in breastfeeding (perhaps alluding to the public and social forces discussed above) but at the same time she does not feel any physical pain (private and self). Overcoming this ambivalence, she then says that there are many "exchanges of affection" (private and self) though this is simultaneously contrasted with the opposing experiences she has had of prejudice and criticism (public and other). Indeed, through these rapid, highly dynamic oscillations, this poetic genesis, Ana continues, describing the affective relationship with her child during breastfeeding as one that sounds deeply intimate:

It's a moment of ours, mine and hers, unique and intense. Tiring and exciting. Its a delivery and a constant donation, a bond of affection, safety and nutrition.

There are no words to describe the feeling of nourishing the baby and your (sic) see her showing you that look with mixed satisfaction, pleasure, safety and love.

Intimacy is a constantly emerging phenomenon. Here we see a moment of abstracted reflection, and though still moving through ambivalence and the boundaries of I<>other and public<>private, here "ours" (private) verses "hers and mine" (I<>other). The opposition of tiring and exciting is itself a meditation on motherhood and the I side of the boundary. Ana continues by commenting on the constant devotion to her child (other), and again, we have the completion of an I<>other fluctuation, overcome by arriving at the comment, "There are no words to describe the feeling of nourishing the baby and seeing her showing you that look with mixed satisfaction, pleasure, safety and love." This last line is perhaps the most obvious statement of intimacy within Ana's narrative, though of course one never has to utter specific words to experience an affective state. What appears throughout the comments she has made is no doubt an overwhelming closeness and connection to her child, negotiated through these rapid boundary fluctuations. Indeed, the poetry of her voice as a mother describing her devotion to breastfeeding her young daughter is itself a poem of real life.

## 6 Conclusion: The Poem Itself Is a Boundary

In this paper, we have presented a process-oriented model of the experience of intimacy. It is our belief that all human psychological phenomena need to be described from within a future-oriented developmental framework based in the axiomatic assumption of irreversible time. One of Valsiner's most important contributions to the field of psychology as a whole is to make clear that irreversible time serves as the ontological underpinning of all theoretical development, both for cultural psychologists and beyond (Valsiner, 2001). In human lives, there can be no sameness, and as such, a science of understanding human behavior must begin from this starting point. It follows from the axiom of irreversibility of time that there is a constant presence of ambiguity and ambivalence within human lives. As things are continually changing, the notion of "stability" is a construct—at times a useful one—but still a semiotic creation, rather than a given, and one that necessarily shares the arena with omnipresent uncertainty.

And so, we here conclude that the poem itself is a boundary within psychological study. Poetry is likely the most emergent form of human communication. Poems are perhaps endlessly open to interpretation and reinterpretation. Creativity and imagination are highlighted within the poetic landscape, welcomed as authors and speakers, understood as truth-tellers, and allowed a validity in this space that is not always granted in other contexts. Poetry holds an openness to becoming, to the unfinished. To the felt but not said. Promise is given to what might be, but that is only vague. In poetry, ambiguity and ambivalence are home, as is the uncertainty of meaning they entail. Humans act like poets in much of their lives, using imagination to overcome uncertainty and to find beauty within that which is painful. Humans often experience feelings for which words are not yet there and may never be. In poetry, meaning is continuously in motion between the literal and imagined. So too, as humans make meaning, the idea is never still. And so, within all human semiotic structure, there is also ambiguity. As psychology moves forward in irreversible time, the poem becomes the boundary arena for understanding the deeply felt, love, intimacy, breastfeeding, and beauty of the vastly complex experience called a human life, always.

**Acknowledgments** To Jaan Valsiner, because the poetic beauty of his theoretical thinking keeps every door open.

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# The Fabric of (Faked) Behavior Shows in Theatre Rehearsals: An Exploration on How Body Movements Turn into Signs for Experiencing



Alberto Rosa

Aesthetics and Psychology of Art are classical fields for inquiring into how cultural materials and activities shape human experience. As one of the most influential authors in the field says, aesthetics is a privileged domain for the development of a methodology to study how, through the semiotic mediation of field-like signs, forms of human feeling turn into hierarchies of signs regulating human conduct (Valsiner, 2014) and making domains of individual subjective life to turn meaningful for personal life (Valsiner, 2020). Art and literature are cultural repositories of such a kind of structured ensembles of signs and thus supply a vast arrangement of databases ready to make good use of for empirical research (Valsiner, 2015).

So far, a sizeable amount to work has been done in the domains of literature, figurative arts, and music (e.g., Kempe, 2016; Valsiner, 2014; Zittoun, 2006) and also theatre (for a review, see Zittoun & Rosenstein, 2018). This paper focuses on some of the possibilities that theatre rehearsals, as a laboratory of performative art, offer to explore how human conduct, imagination, and experience get interwoven when acting and understanding behavior.

## 1 Life and Theatre Swinging Between Authenticity and Pretense

Theatre and Social Science have been travel companions since Epictetus to Erving Goffman and beyond. Theatre (or at least naturalist theatre) is a form of art that presents a fictional world by way of human beings moving and acting in actual world. As Fischer-Lichte says, we can call it theatre if “A incarnates X while S is present” (1999, p. 13): i.e., when somebody acts as if it were somebody else before

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an audience. But this definition still is not sufficient to tell apart theatre (as a form of art) from the ability to deceive somebody else, unless it is added that both actors and spectators know in advance that what is being acted and contemplated is a fictitious reality (Trancón, 2004). This is only possible if the receiver's world of semiotized objects (its personal semiosphere) is not to be totally foreign to that of the world presented in the encountered work of art, or otherwise the latter would be incomprehensible. That is why Fischer-Lichte (1999) says that theatre reflects twice upon a culture: imitating it and presenting that image before reflective consciousness.

## 2 Naturalist Theatre: The Art of Shaping Truthful Impostures

A theatrical performance is carried out by people, who faking their behavior manage that other people believe that behavior to be, to greater or lesser extent, truthful. This only happens when some kind of *bad faith* is exercised, either as resulting from an implicit pact between actors and spectators or when a crook swindles somebody else's more or less genuine naivety.

The art of theatre is based upon creating signs (what is presented on the stage) that represent other signs (the voice, movements, postures, gestures of the characters the actors embody), which in turn represent how the characters are like when doing their business, their intent, and how they feel vis-à-vis the ongoing events. When such aim is achieved, it is said that the representation is *truthful*, namely, that what is happening on stage is felt to have meaning, authenticity, to the extreme of making one feeling thrilled (Aristotle's *mimesis* and *catharsis*). This requires deploying an arrangement of varied semiotic systems (lighting, furniture, wardrobe, sound, etc. – the stage set) that, together with the actors' actions, shape the materiality of a performance capable of transmitting emotion to the audience, and so reaches a metaphorical power. That is why theatre has its own aesthetics: *theatricality* or poeticity of representation, which according to Barthes is “theatre minus text” (Meerzon, 2011).

### *The Production of the “Performance Text”*

The preparation of the play spectators will eventually watch on scene requires the composition of what is known as a “performance text” that adds the elements of theatricality needed to stage the “dramatic text” written by the playwright. This includes, in addition to the preparation of the stage set (lighting, furniture, etc.), the collaborative work of actors and director to add life and movement to the received

text. This makes a theatre production to be authored by many participants, among which the director and actors are the more noted.

The so-called Stanislavski's system<sup>1</sup> is the most followed for the training of actors and the preparation of theatre plays. It starts with the "active analysis" of the dramatic text. This initial process takes about two thirds of the total time allotted for the rehearsals and can be described as follows:

"First of all, the actors read the scene. Second, they assessed the facts of the scene... What is the event? What are the inciting objectives and counter-objectives? [...] The third stage consisted of the actors improvising the scene using their own words, incorporating any of the facts that they could remember. [...] Following the improvisation, the actors reread the scene and compared it with what they had just experienced. They noted which facts were retained and which were forgotten, and whether the inciting incident took place. Rehearsing [...] consisted of repeating this four stage process. [...] With each new improvisation, the actors strove to add more details of events, language, and images... The fifth and final stage involved memorizing the scene... in fact, if the improvisational work had been successful, they found that the scene had virtually 'learned itself'." (Merlin, 2003: 34f; quoted by Sholte, 2016)

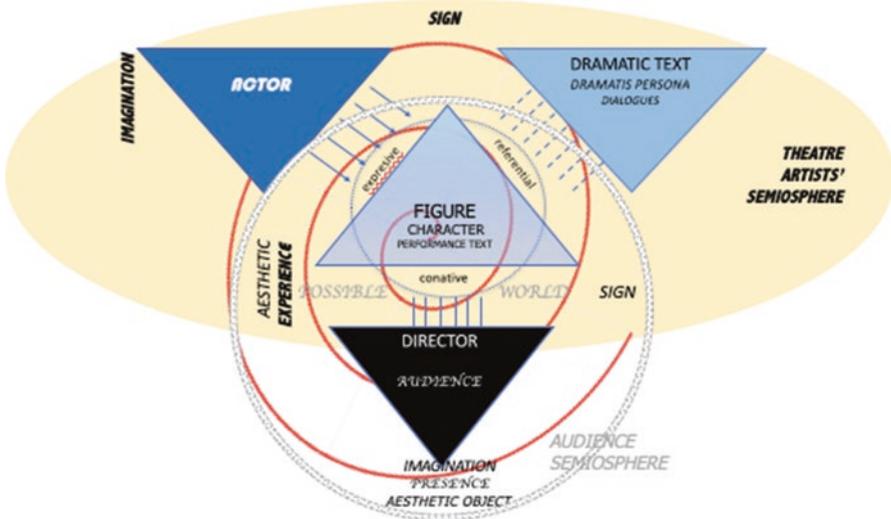
Text analysis and interpretation, conversations and debates among actors and the director, and improvised dramatizations of the scene shape together a cycle that is re-started again and again until some satisfactory result for the scene under scrutiny is achieved, to be further revised as other scenes go through same process, until the performance text of the play as a whole reaches a satisfactory coherence.

## *Stage Figures*

The aim of active analysis is to progress, scene by scene, in the production of the "possible world" of the play to be presented before the audience. This, as Meerzon says, requires embodying the argument of the play in "the here-and-now of the stage space and time, which results in the actors' presentation of their *stage figures*" (2011, p. 240) – the sign "that generates the aesthetic object as a dynamic image in the minds of the perceiving audience"<sup>2</sup> (Quinn, 1989, p. 76; quoted by Meerzon, 2011). Stage figures are what adds *theatricality* to the *literariness* of the dramatic text.

<sup>1</sup>Constantin Stanislavski (real name Konstantín Serguéievich Alekséiev, 1863–1938) was a Russian actor, director, and theatre theorist who founded the Moscow Art Theatre and developed a well-known system for actor training and theatre production.

<sup>2</sup>Figure 1 shows the similarities and differences on the semiotic processes producing aesthetic experiences in the actor and in the audience. In both cases, the aesthetic experience is an interpretation (*thirdness*, in Peirce's terminology) that goes together with a sign (*firstness*) that suggests an image referring to some more or less familiar previous experience (secondness). The difference is in how it works as a sign in one case and the other. In the case of the actor, the sign is the dramatic text (and the directions of the director), and the interpretation is the scene figures she/he performs before the audience, while for the latter the stage figure is the sign that invokes the presence of the character and provokes the aesthetic experience.



**Fig. 1** Recursive cycles of conversations and improvisations in the elaboration of stage figures, characters, and the performance text. During improvisations, the director (and also other participant actors) takes the role of audience. This makes the sense of communication to be reversible while in conversations involving suggestions, guidance, and criticisms aimed to influence the actor's performance. The show the audience watch (with its figures and characters) is the site where the artists' and spectators' semiospheres overlap

Active analysis shapes and reshapes stage figures throughout recursive cycles of communicative interexchange (see Fig. 1). The stage figure, then, is a sign included within a tripartite structure that also includes the "I" of the actor and his interpretation of the dramatic character sketched in the dramatic text. In addition, it is also a symbol that gathers together "the three functional terms of Karl Bühler's semantic *organon-model*: *expressive* — relating to actor him/ herself, *conative* — relating to the audience's perception constituting 'the mental *aesthetic object*,' and *referential* — relating to producing Stage Figure" (Quinn, 1989, p. 80; quoted by Meerzon, 2011).

### ***Abductive Production of Semantized Objects When Devising Stage Figures and Characters***

Active analysis is a system of distributed abductive cognition in which hypothesis about how to stage the dramatic text is formulated, discussed, and eventually put into trial through actors' improvised rehearsals. This is an iterative and fractal process in which verbal and *enactive arguments* (gestures, body movements – Rosa, 2018) appear as signs of the semiotized objects, which together furnish the intentional world (Bruner, 1990) participants elaborate while searching for a shared

understanding of the fragment of the dramatic text under examination. This sometimes takes to the construction of scaffolding devices useful for understanding what is to be represented, which, once they served their function, may later be dropped. It could also involve physical exercises for inducing a particular mood, the introduction or removal of elements of the stage set, or the elaboration of a character's life story when trying to figure out how his or her personality could be like (see Rosa et al., 2019).

### *The Shaping of Enactive Arguments When Devising Stage Figures*

When training actors, Stanislavski emphasized the importance of experiencing for a truthful performance. Such experiencing is not just perceiving a situation, but a complex semiotic process that involves putting oneself within that situation, experimenting feelings and tensions, and sensing a drive to act that gets eventually relieved through muscular action. This obviously requires the use of imagination, attention, and concentration to generate a precise focus of musculature efforts to be relieved through action, so that acting does result not only from a sense of intent in the contextual situation but also toward pursuing a goal going beyond what is actually visible – e.g., “not only drinking, but also drowning my sorrows” (Ostdiek, 2012). In other words, the actor's task is to evoke feelings from his or her own experiences and re-arrange them in the order required for the figure to be created.

This requires, first, to elaborate an image of the role starting from the dramatic text, then imagining embodying it, and eventually matching that image to a schema of scenic movements. Sometimes this demands leaving imagining momentarily aside and starting with physical exercises able to drive the actor into a creative state. These exercises are meant to help the actor to become aware of his inner sensations and develop imagery to fuel embodiment, so that the actors' acting genuinely came from within, expressing emotion through gestures, making movements to arise rather than being automatized. “What Stanislavski meant by gesture is the ability for each actor to formulate an inner image and perform the image that is born in the mind externally in time and space” (Weygandt, 2019, p.4).

Stanislavski's exercises of psycho-technique were devised for this purpose. They included to attend to the *given circumstances* (the who, what, where, and why of actions), to the flow of events around which the story takes shape, and to elements in the scenic set and attune all that into the temporal rhythm of the performance. All this together constitute the *score* – the fluid “line of physical movement sewn into the performance” (Weygandt, 2019, p.6).

Whatever the case, if movements and gestures either arise from physical exercises or are provoked by imagining being in a particular situation, they simultaneously result from the flow of feelings felt, the understanding of the situation faced (regardless of whether this is real or imagined), the position (Harré, 2012) taken

before that situation, and the purpose that arises from that, within the constraints and possibilities available. In other words, the *semiotic arguments* to be read by the audience as signs representing the character's understandings, feelings, and purposes can only result from the actor's body movements and gestures arising within *lived trajectories of the experience* (Rosa, 2016), even if the latter has only been imagined and feigned in rehearsals.

Vygotsky (1998), when discussing Diderot's *The Paradox of Acting* (1769/1883), went into the hidden details of the nature of the emotions expressed by actors. When acting "the actor had listened enough to himself (...). His talent is not in feeling as you may imagine him doing, but in carefully executing the external signs of feeling, and so he deceives you" (p.83). "... [T]he supra-personal ideal passions the actor transmits on scene (...) are not natural feelings, real in the life of this or that actor, but artificial, in the same manner as a novel, a sonata or a sculpture" (p.83). "Before being embodied by the actor, they had found their literary expression, they were in the environment, in social consciousness" (p.86). In sum, as Stanislavski pictured them, "[t]hese feelings are not exactly those experienced by the actor in his life. They are better to be conceived as feelings and concepts distilled from anything superfluous, generalized" (p. 91). In sum, they are sociocultural and historical constructions evoked by symbols embodied in *enactive arguments* crafted for communication.

### 3 Semiotics of Experience and Behavior in Life and in Theatre Performance

What has been said so far supports the idea that behavior, irrespective of whether genuine or faked, is always made of the same stuff. Human behavior is made of muscular, glandular, and vocal movements arising when receiving sensorial inputs in a scenery (a space furnished with semiotized objects) where a situation (a set of actions arranged in a plot shaping an understandable story) is appraised (the feeling of being affected) leading one to take a position (a role chosen among the ones available in the story), which drives one to perform an *enactive argument* that adapts the chosen role's script to the surrounding circumstances (running away, watching, participating), what eventually leads to feelings appraising one's own performance, and so restarting a new cycle.

#### *Trajectories of Experience and I Positions*

This makes behavior to belong to a *trajectory of experience* (Rosa, 2016; Rosa & González, 2013), which can also be modelled as a stream of recursive semioses along which a series of semiotized objects arise (material entities, spatial settings,

events and stories, feelings and images, drives and desires, postures and gestures, the self and the others) which furnish and populate one's intentional world, making it meaningful. Three of these objects, stories, position, and gestures (all of them made of cultural materials), form together a dynamic structure (the positioning triangle) that carries within a moral order that attributes rights and duties that give sense to the agent's acting when taking that role (Harré, 2012).

The consequence is that, even if made of the same stuff, the trajectories of experiences (and behavior) lived in the first-person singular cannot be identical to those raised when observing or listening to what somebody else does or reports. The I position (Hermanns, 2001) taken in one and the other case are different. Most surely, in both cases, moral feelings arise, but it is not the same to feel oneself ashamed, proud, or guilty, that to feel that somebody else did something shameful, admirable, or despicable. In both cases, one feels the impulse to ignore, praise, or rebuke either oneself or the other, but it hardly could be disputed that the effect on one's own self (and upon one's subsequent experiences and behavior) is rather different in both cases. It is not the same to feel remorse and look for ways to get rid of (or delve into) that sense of guilt, that to feel that somebody else feels (or should feel) remorse while one's own self feels more or less comfortably above the situation.

Spectators in the theatre are in a position similar to the second case presented above. But still there is something more – they know that what they are witnessing is fiction. They do not feel personally affected by what they are watching or at least not to the extent that happens when running into a real conflicting situation. They do not feel the urge to ignoring or getting involved in what is going on. When watching a theatre play, all they are expected to do is to enjoy the experiences felt while contemplating the performance.

Theatre actors are also far from being in the position of somebody participating in a real-life incident. They have to pretend to be so, but they are not the characters they embody. They are people whose task is to deceive the audience and make their fakes credible. According to Stanislavski's system, what actors do when acting is to provoke in themselves autonomic responses within trajectories of experience on a moment-to-moment basis in order to arise body movements.

### ***Enactive Arguments Are Synthetic Signs Shaping Dramatic Actuations and Theatrical Aesthetic Objects***

Theatre is a performative art. Body movements and dictions are the stuff its communicative signs are made of. They are made of *gestures* performed for a *purpose*, which *present* events in the *real* world that represent a *fictional* reality (supposedly, present, future, or imagined), because their *form* (structure) carries within *pragmatic*, *normative*, and *affective* values, which, in turn, refer simultaneously to the signified semiotized object, the performer, and the spectator who feels to be before the real presence (value of *truth*) of a semiotized object.

Dramatic actuations have a structure that gathers together behavioral and semi-otic properties (an *intentional schema* is also a *legisign*) able to stabilize both the encounters of the body with elements of the environment and the inner experience guiding and representing such encounters (Rosa, 2007). Recursive actuations-semiosis accumulate further representational resources with the result of producing an *enactive argument* – a kind of sign which turns the environmental element into a *semiotized object* (Rosa, 2018), which also offers slots for the development of further recursive semiosis adding further layers of meaning. Figure 2, b shows the formal semiotic structure of an argument, whose tetrahedral form provides capabilities for compiling truth, formal, pragmatic, affective, aesthetic, and moral values (see Rosa & Valsiner, 2018, for a detailed explanation).

To make the audience to feel moved by their performance, actors must play their roles in such a way as to produce estrangement and affective tension, not only for catching attention but also to drive spectators to striving into their feelings to look for the meaning of what they are watching. As Valsiner (2020) says, it is only before the *sublime* (i.e., when something is felt, but cannot be attained by any of mind’s representations) that the tension between alternative paths of affective semiosis takes one to search for a generalized meaning. This could result in either

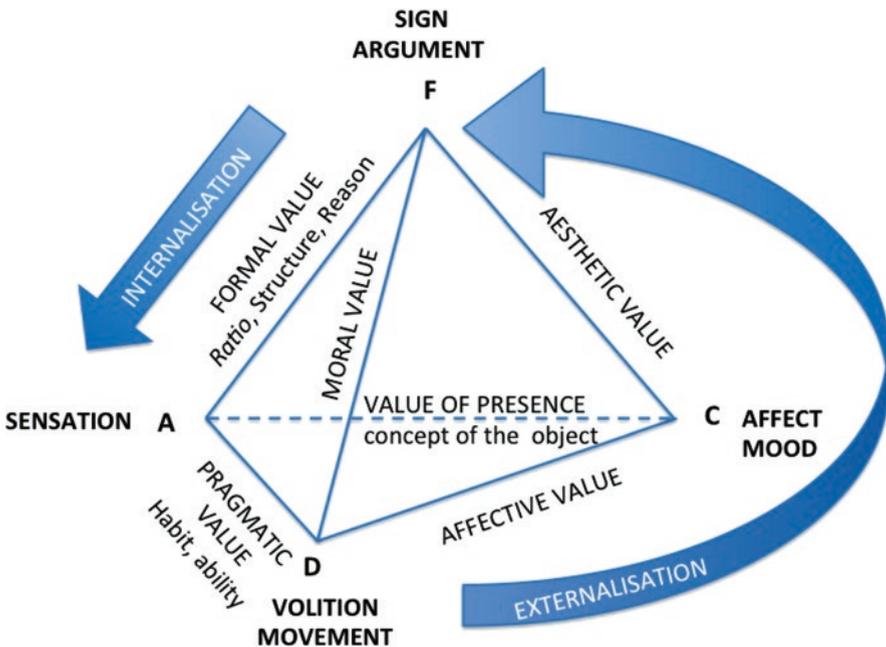


Fig. 2 (a) Argument: a semiotic sign compiling values arising from action and producing experiences. (Reproduced with permission from Rosa & Valsiner, 2018, p. 641).

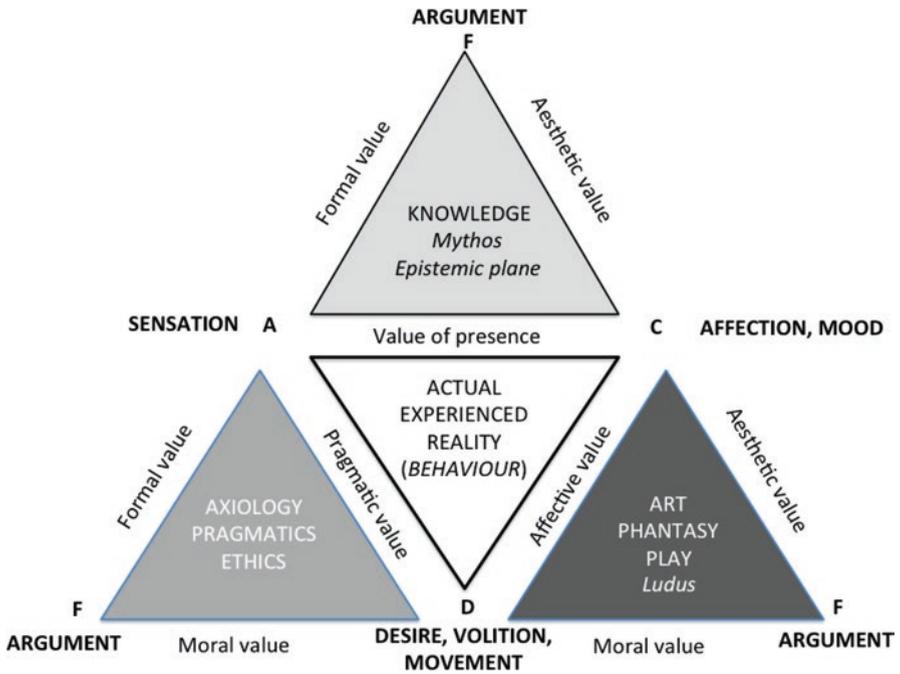


Fig. 2 (continued) (b) Fields of sense (and culture) arising from experience and influencing behavior. (Projection on a plane of the four faces of the tetrahedron presented in Fig. 2a). (Reproduced with permission from Rosa & Valsiner, 2018, p. 641)

conceptualizing the element felt as a mundane ordinary object, making the tension disappear, or leaving aside any pragmatic interest, going into the contemplation of the experience felt, trying to figure out what that is like, and so delving into the affects it produces on oneself – i.e., going into the aesthetic realm. The consequence is that one is driven not only to the appreciation of the grace or vividness of an actuation, or the horror felt for the suffering a character endures, but also to going into the (poetic) creation of new meanings, sometimes leaving aside the moral of the witnessed story.

#### 4 Packing and Unpacking the Theatre Performance Black Box

The carefully crafted performance spectators eventually watch appears before them as a black box whose sealed surface hides the inner workings of the production machinery above described (Sholte, 2016). The staged performance presents “a *fictitious reality* and a *real fiction*” (Trancón, 2004; p. 119) – a complex object difficult to ascertain, a Gestalt made up of many meaningful figures which make many

conflicting affects to arise. No wonder such a complex product, once it is finished and presented, is very difficult to unpack. It is by looking into the in and outs of the production process and observing how improvisations, active analysis, and rehearsals sculpture and polish the scenic figures to be performed and also the boundary conditions for the creation of the actors' experiences and the canalization of their behavior are developed and adjusted that the inner weaving of the delicate fabric threading together experience, imagination, and behavior can be made apparent.

Theatre artists are artisans of behavior and their rehearsals workshops for experimenting with the microgenesis of experience and behavior via abductive collective simulations. When so doing, they ensemble together processes, which are at once semiotic, experiential, behavioral, and communicative, and tune and fix them together into scores of movements that then are turned into signs capable of producing more or less similar effects again and again upon audiences that change every day (see Rosa et al., 2019, for an empirical research on this matter). When so doing, artists are searching for this product to reach *validity* and *reliability* vis-à-vis a public with whom they share a common folk psychology; otherwise, neither actors could produce enactive arguments addressing the audience, nor the latter would be able to make sense of them. When this is achieved, it could be said they managed to produce *truth* -a truthful performance: a goal not far from what scientists look for when doing their business.

Observations on the development of the production process are not only valuable for studying how overt behavior (not only faked but also spontaneous) arises but also useful for going into inquiring how the audience understands and interprets the enacted arguments and the whole play showed before them. Theatre is a performative art, and that means that a double recursive process of interpretation is to be taken into account: the interpretation of the dramatic text that theatre artists carry out when developing the production and the spectators' understanding of the show they watch. This means not only that each representation of the play cannot be identical to others but also that each spectator's understanding does not only results from semiosis raised by the consecutive scenic signs she/he chooses to attend during the show, but that they also get intermingled with other experiences arising from her/his personal culture, mood, and positioning vis-à-vis the spectacle watched. The consequence is that the *stream of consciousness* (James, 1890) lived by the different members of the audience should be expected to be variegated. However, although consciousness is a black box inaccessible to a synchronic examination of its flow, there are methods able to offering glimpses on how the semiotic process of experience evolves. That requires a previous elaboration of a model that encompasses both, the kind of interpretative semiotic processes the researcher want to focus upon and a previous analysis of the signs displayed on the scenery. *Trajectories of experience* offer a methodological approach useful for empirical research in this domain (see Rosa and González, 2013).

## 5 Concluding Remarks

Theatre artists are careful in concealing from the public the inner workings of the sculpturing of behavior behind the polished cover of the staged performance. Psychologists, in contrast, struggle to find ways for whitening the black box the others put so much care in sealing. The first are experts in assembling pieces of folk psychology into packages of behavior capable of deceiving, while the others struggle to develop methodological and theoretical tools to shed light on how the hidden workings of psyche affect behavior. It is as if they were heading to goals so irreconcilable as fake and truth are. But this is a deceptive impression. Even if both travel in opposite directions, they criss-cross the borders of the laboring grounds where experience and behavior are cooked. When both gather there and work together, they realize they can be travel companions in the venture of translating signs and meanings coming from the semiospheres of scientific and folk psychology for making new meanings and signs, and also new semiotized objects, to appear.

Theatre and life, deceit and truth, need each other for reasons well beyond their antinomy. As Umberto Eco says, “if something is not useful for deceiving, it cannot be useful to say truth; in fact it would be useful for nothing” (2000, p.22). Signs present something else they are not. They are able to make us believe we are conscious of entities which are far beyond our sensorial capacities, such as psyche, love, or energy, and even make us believe we know the world well enough as to command at least some of the events our life is made of. Looking into the realms in which signs are manufactured for deceiving reminds us that it is not redundant to keep in mind that pretense is nested in the very kernel of the semiotic function, that experiences can be deceitful, and that experiments always are a kind of simulation. That is why working in the Psychology or Art is an exploration into grounds where cultural signs, meanings, and experiences are seed and nursed. As I see it, there is no better homage to a pioneer of such exploration, as Jaan Valsiner is, that joining him into expanding that task.

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**Part VI**  
**Psychology as a Global Science**

# Local Ideas for a Global Science: The Journey from Indian Psychology to Cultural Psychology



Nandita Chaudhary

Despite India's prominent past, indigenous ideas from Indian cultural heritage were submerged under subaltern politics. Like other countries of the developing world, India has a wealth of indigenous knowledge and philosophical traditions, but these ideas did not fit with modern methods of observation and experimentation. Western Psychology arrived in India as a readymade package in the early twentieth century, and it was only in the 1960s and 1970s that cultural relevance was discussed and issues related to Indian society came to the forefront. Indian Psychology gained attention as a discipline that derived from indigenous knowledge systems. The struggle between cultural relevance and global knowledge has persisted, and Indian indigenous psychology has also had to deal with a variegated cultural and linguistic fabric and local conflicts about what "Indian-ness" is and which Indian traditions will be included in its academic discourse. In this adventure through borders and boundaries and attributions and assumptions, Cultural Psychology arrived with an invitation for genuine dialogue, facilitating a forum where ideas could be expressed without fear or favor. In the version of Cultural Psychology under the mentorship of Jaan Valsiner, social lives in "other" cultures were not viewed as exotic outliers where ideas would be tested, but as local instances of human psychological phenomena in dynamic engagement with context in irreversible time. Any location was just another manifestation of the human struggle for making sense of their world, a challenge that faced every human society. For Indian psychologists, Cultural Psychology can provide a productive resolution to the continued impasse between indigenous ideas and global science.

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## 1 Psychology as a Global Discipline

Western ideology became a global influence through colonial expansion and Western affluence, resulting in a hierarchy in the way culture was viewed, supported, and educated for. In the case of India, for instance, British rule made systematic and sustained impact on local cultural beliefs and practices by ignoring, silencing, rejecting, or “repairing” people’s ways of living through administrative reform, legal policy, and educational practice. However, it is important to note, as Gandhiji pointed out, British rule could never have succeeded without the cooperation of local people, and India’s ethnic, social, and geographical diversity also interfered with the consolidation of resistance against the establishment of colonies. Thus, local ideas have come into conflict not just with foreign influence but also because of within-country power struggles and tensions religious, regional, and ethnic.

The field of Psychology experienced a similar fate. As Psychology became a globally recognized discipline, concepts and processes emerged primarily through research in Europe and America. From ancient times, religious and metaphysical discourse contained elaborate theories of human nature, actions, perceptions, and interactions with the environment. Despite this elaborate wealth of ontological and epistemological knowledge, these ideas did not fall into the frame of scientific discourse on account of their speculative, mysterious, and sometimes even esoteric quality. Modern scientific methods of observation and experimentation did not permit the entry of speculation and conjecture, especially from sources that were affiliated with religion and Eastern philosophical traditions.

This “global” Psychology originated in the West and exported to other countries through scholars who were trained in the West. The first course was established in Calcutta University in 1905. Indian philosophical traditions were ignored in the advancement of the social sciences and humanities, giving a clear priority to the teaching of Western knowledge in the name of modernization and building a scientific temperament. Psychology in India was completely distanced from Indian Psychology, which could be described as indigenous ideas about ontology and epistemology. This created a divide between what was studied and what was learned; culture and science became artificially separated in a country where, traditionally, science was practiced within religion.

Although cultural processes were recognized by scholars since the inception of Psychology (Jahoda & Krewer, 1997), the first systematic attempts to investigate “culture” in psychological phenomena were initiated through the establishment of cross-cultural psychology outside the mainstream, probably to allow for the testing of ideas emerging from the West on other people. Cross-cultural psychology also provided a “playground” for other cultures to exchange ideas outside of the main playing field. Over the years, scholarship under the umbrella of Cultural Psychology has provided a much more wholesome embrace of culture and person as well as general psychology and local cultural phenomena. In this chapter, I will make attempts toward this synthesis, drawing heavily from the semiotic cultural

psychology proposed by Jaan Valsiner to demonstrate how his leadership provides a productive solution to the impasse between the global and local.

## 2 Psychology and Culture

The relationship between psychology and culture has been an important theme in the study of the human condition. The fundamental question of how “personal actions participate in social change” has been a persisting question for the social sciences. The interdependence between these two processes requires the development of a theoretical system that addresses these phenomena together and real-life cultural-psychological phenomena as instances where the person-culture dynamics can be explored (Valsiner, 1996, p. 443). In the theoretical explanations of the interdependence of culture and person, reductionism can happen both upward, that personal traits are extracts of social entities, or downward, that personality is based on biology. Pulling out of these two possibilities, Valsiner takes a third option, the elaboration of systemic relationships between person and the culturally organized social setting in real-life situations.

Psychology constitutes the creation of knowledge about the human condition including our understanding of social relationships, collective processes, cultural diversity, and global relations. Examining the intricate connections between psychological processes and cultural phenomena is a core concern of the human sciences. Ontological positions in any discipline guide epistemology and methodological procedures, and in the human sciences, knowledge creation has a direct impact on the ways in which we understand ourselves and our worlds. Furthermore, there are practical applications regarding value orientations, attitudes, social interactions, and personal advancement through the transfer of knowledge. Educational institutions, social policies, intervention programs, welfare activities, developmental assessments, and therapeutic approaches are some of the domains in which psychological research has direct application. Thus, psychological theory and research can directly impact social justice, ecological sustainability, and human well-being because of the potential relevance of psychological principles on practice.

This makes the advancement of knowledge in Psychology intimately tied up with the notions of society and culture. Among the many definitions of culture, it can be effectively conceptualized as a system in which beliefs, values, and practices shape and are shaped by local contexts in terms of ecology, biology, and history (Rogoff, 2003). These “cultures” are manifested in people’s interactions with each other as well as the environments they inhabit. The idea of culture as an important feature of human life is ancient, as Jahoda and Krewer (1997) argue. But as pervasive as culture is in the human dynamics, it also remains undefinable (Jahoda, 1995). As Valsiner points out (2018), as a hyper-concept, whose defining will reduce rather than enhance its usefulness (Valsiner, 2019), indefinability is its strength, a key expression for redefining Psychology (Valsiner, Marsico, Chaudhary, Sato, & Dazzani, 2016). This position on culture helps us to resolve a long-standing

conundrum, how do we pin down culture to a specific definition. Similar to the philosophical axiom of *neti-neti* in Hinduism, meaning “not this, not that” that is used as a method of negation used as a key method of Vedic enquiry (Devananda, 1995/2003), it would be possible to mark culture by explaining what it is not. Culture is neither country nor community, not religion, and not social practice. It is all of this and more. Culture, let us accept, is indefinable, consisting of a “suchness” (Beckett, 1959) to which no other definition applies!

Human beings are all ethnocentric because their intimate knowledge of their own cultures binds them into using that as a base. Over the course of generations, cultural practices become refined and consolidated, sometimes changed, and even discarded (Sparrow, 2016). For people who share cultural values, these meaningful associations and interactions are often invisible and believed to be universal until they are (to their surprise) confronted by a different way of living. Depending upon the power dynamics between interacting groups, the practices may be judged as aberrant, thereby keeping a person secure in the belief that their ways are the best, and should form universal “gold standards” without realizing that every context will have its own “ways” of dealing with their world. Despite these dynamics, it is also true that cultures interact and, also, people living within a particular context can, in fact, change their ways and identify themselves with another way of living (Sparrow, 2016). This helps us to explain intercultural heterogeneity and cross-cultural similarities. As Psychology became a globally recognized subject, the sub-discipline of cross-cultural psychology was created “outside” the mainstream to probably provide a “playground” for other cultures to exchange ideas, thereby leaving the core discipline undisturbed by the discussion of “culture.” Culture, therefore, is a phenomenon constructed by goal-oriented, feeling, and thinking human beings as they face uncertainty in irreversible time. Another important feature of Cultural Psychology is the inclusion of personal, interpersonal, and collective processes as they make up different layers of meaning. Culture is both inside a person’s mind, a personal manifestation of culture, and a shared system of culturally constructed environment.

As people move around the world, the intersections between cultures become a prominent source of cultural exchange and cultural change. In the early phases of the development of the relationship of culture and psychology, the viewpoint was predominantly universal, that psychological discoveries were universally valid and modifications on these basic features of human functioning were imposed by cultural processes. This viewpoint shifted in the late 1980s, and a number of researchers questioned this stance, even going so far as to deny “psychic unity” as it had come to be understood. Cultural psychologies emphasized shared meanings in each culture, and these meanings may be quite different from culture to culture. However, for mainstream psychological theory, research, and practice, ideas remained bound within notions of a universal and transcendent mental core, while culture was viewed as “noise.” As Henrich (2020) informs us, the specific advances in Western society permitted the advancement of academic views when there is an imbalance of power, and the dynamics of domination come into play, as was seen in the case of colonialism.

In its global tradition, Psychology's history is limited by the way in which it remains unconcerned with philosophical and existential realities even in its own history (Valsiner, 2012). So, when it comes to other traditions, classical and folk, these are simply ignored. The Northern European and North American cases (in the narrowest sense) become representative for the world. These ideas were then transported to the rest of the world to follow, through colonization and other instruments of Western affluence, resulting in a distorted, myopic view of the human condition. The walls the discipline built around itself to preserve, protect, and dominate obfuscated the possibility of genuine dialogue and international collaboration. Furthermore, despite the immediate and intimate connections between Psychology and society, the role played by the subject has become increasingly institutionalized and centralized (Valsiner, 2012), and society seems to be losing the capacity to reflect on simple problems without turning to experts for technical solutions, and institutions of higher learning increasingly come under the control of administration:

Out of a lack of confidence, a lack of skill, respect for science, fear of authority, or simply being too lazy to think for ourselves, we are relying on experts rather than our own insights. We now seem to need experts to tell us that pollution is destroying the ecological balance on earth, that nuclear bombs could blow up the world, that real war is frightening to children, that people do feel stress when they go through a divorce, that infants are healthier when they are loved, that the family does have an important social role in the development of children, and that the education system is in trouble. What should be obvious to us only gains the status of truth when endorsed by experts. Our training is such that when faced with even the smallest personal or societal issues, we look to experts for answers. This is tied to something peculiar....the transformation of every moral crisis into a technical problem for which there should be an expert solution. (Moghaddam, 1997, p. 9–10)

### **3 India and the World: How Indian Ideas Were Systematically Submerged**

We have several sources to examine the history of Psychology, but to set the stage for this discussion, let us look at the psychology of history! Western imperialism was responsible for a sweeping dismissal of local cultures worldwide. For Indians, with the arrival of the British and the establishment of a nationwide administrative, legal, and educational system, several ethnic practices became criminalized, while others were ignored. Many beliefs were dismissed as superstition, and to be “modern and progressive,” one was compelled by the missionary schooling to abandon traditional ways, faith, food, language, and dress, to become part of the global scientifically recognized community. Yet many intimate, domestic, and personal practices remained harder to change. Women's clothing, food habits, and other practices were much slower to change. Women kept traditions alive in the personal space of domestic life, thereby creating a complex matrix of “outside culture” and home life.

Indians have never really fit into Psychology's model (Chaudhary & Shukla, 2019). Several features of the Indian psyche and sociality remain stubbornly

resistant. One such domain is family relationships. Besides this, India is a relatively young country, with a large proportion of youth. The largely ignored cohort (Bhatia, 2018) of India's 600 million youth does not find a place in many studies of adolescence, whether about their aspirations or identity development.

In the pluralist subcontinent, people live in conditions ranging between highly advanced to hunting-gathering and subsistence agriculture. There is simultaneously play between continuity and change as tradition and modernity are amalgamated, resulting in unique expressions of hybridization. Most of its urban centers and villages are experiencing extraordinary changes, but many people live as we did thousands of years ago. With some important exceptions, rural, tribal, and urban India have embraced technology, specifically mobile technology. Connectivity and access have had a profound impact on several aspects of people's lives like communication, marketing, and trade, but the maximum influence of mobile technology has been the connectivity among family members.

For the longest time, Indians have been in awe of the West. Under the hangover of the British rule, democracy was interpreted by an elite class of leaders. Over the recent decades, however, post-colonial dynamics has become transformed, and a wave of innovation and entrepreneurship has emerged. Technology is largely responsible for this consolidation of social consensus, commercial action, and political opinion, although it could have as easily been a disruptive force. Paradoxically, India's chaotic and diverse fabric is also quite impenetrable. "It has been said more than once, that whatever one can truly say about India, you can also say the exact opposite with equal truthfulness" (Ramanujan, 1991, p. xv).

Change is not new to India. Throughout its history, foreigners have travelled to the subcontinent for trade, attracted by the wealth and culture of its people. Many also stayed and plundered the kingdoms and drained its wealth. The scars of history are scattered all over the country's geography (Sanyal, 2012). Despite the many changes and the spread of globalization, or maybe because of it, the old ways persist. The past, to quote a renowned historian, is always present (Thapar, 2014). Additionally, there is a collective comfort with plurality in Indian social life and individual identity that derives from the vast diversity within the country, diversity in language, custom, food, religion, caste, and occupation (Chaudhary, 2004).

In contemporary Indian cities, global corporate models like Amazon and Uber have had to review their policies to adapt to a different work culture. Corporates are in fact repatriated locally (Appadurai, 1995), and those that fail to adapt do not survive in the massive, attractive market, where even small profits can be magnified when one considers the number of consumers involved. In this regard, India and China, the two giant consumers in the present times, are quite unlike each other. In fact, one scholar remarked that India's strengths are China's weaknesses and India's weaknesses are China's strengths (Ramesh, 2005). The two countries are poles apart. The example of the global giant, McDonald's, is a case in point. The franchisee of the company in India is himself a vegetarian, and over the years, he has guided products and delivery with great insight. In an interview with the BBC, Jatalia (the head of McDonald's in India) says, "What convinced us was that McDonald's was willing to localise. They promised that there would be no beef or

pork on the menu. Nearly half of Indians are vegetarian so choosing a vegetarian to run their outlets here makes sense” (Kannan, 2014). In the middle of the struggle between the old ways and the new, the local and the global, a new sort of childhood and family life is emerging (Sharma, 2003). Given all these factors of hybridization, demographic, cultural, ethnic, and historical uniqueness, even in the most technologically advanced sections of society, Indians remain hard to understand and explain using traditional psychological theory and methods. This was the reason why the movement for an Indian Psychology was initiated. But first, let me explore the status of Psychology in India.

## 4 Psychology in India

The first Psychology course was introduced in Calcutta University in the year 1905. Its syllabus was drawn directly from American and British universities, thus maintaining a universal and culturally myopic perspective (Sinha, 1994). Western Psychology came as a readymade package in the early twentieth century, completely unmindful of India’s intellectual traditions, replacing them in a single stroke (Nandy, 1974). Cultural practices from indigenous Indian communities became submerged as exotic, peculiar, and needing to be ignored, silenced, rejected, or repaired because of hegemony, orientalism, and associated attributions. Over the years, several scholars who approached the region with interest tended to see Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and other traditions as archaic, and along with other developing countries, India became a fertile testing ground for universal ideas, first in Psychology and then in cross-cultural psychology. At the same time, foreign-trained Indian psychologists returned to spread the science they had learned with enthusiasm, and Psychology in Indian universities became a faithful follower of the mainstream. Psychoanalysis also gained recognition in the early twentieth century with the establishment of the Indian Psychoanalytic Society in 1922, which was affiliated with the International Psychoanalytic Association, which helped in training psychoanalysts and also in popularizing the discipline (Sinha, 1994). Under the British Empire, degrees from universities in the UK-commanded tremendous prestige and scholars who received state scholarships would mostly travel there to receive their degrees and return as well-respected professors, occupying important positions. During this period, the Universities of London, Edinburgh, and Cambridge greatly influenced the directions that psychological research took in the country. Psychologists like Spearman, Burt, Godfrey Thomson, Bartlett, and Eysenck were very influential in the direction that Psychology in India took, including studies on intelligence, learning, and higher mental processes. In a specific mention of early research on rumors during natural disasters, the contribution of two of Bartlett’s students Prasad and Sinha was recognized in developing Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance (Jones, 1985). Following India’s independence, the focus shifted to American universities for higher education. For instance, the United States Educational Foundation in India (USEFI) Alumni Directory (1950–1985) shows that of 73 Indian scholars in

psychology who travelled to the USA, many returned with a doctoral degree and fully absorbed the traditions of American psychology. Their influence on Psychology teaching in India has been enormous. After independence, just 3 universities in the country had departments of psychology which later went up to 66 in 1984 and 70 by 1994, leading to an upsurge in teaching and research activity as well as diversification in the field. Today, in 1 estimate<sup>1</sup> that lists all colleges where Psychology courses are taught, a total of 1028 institutions have been listed.

Over the years, several scholars who approached the region with interest tended to see Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, and other traditions as peculiar, exotic, and archaic, a fertile testing ground for their universal ideas. At the same time, some foreign-trained Indian psychologists returned home to spread the science they had learned with enthusiasm.

In the collective journey of Psychology in India, Indian Psychology was born, a Psychology that was developed from relevant material from ancient Indian thought; the earliest publication was by Jadunath Sinha (1934), where he explored the philosophical literature of India rich in metaphysics, psychology, logic, ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology. There is no system of Indian philosophy which has not advanced a theory of knowledge and which has not appealed to the facts of experience. Every school of philosophy has made valuable contributions to psychology, logic, ethics, and other mental sciences (Sinha, 1934).

Despite these advancements, there remained a serious separation between cultural lives and academic learning. Youth who sought to enter higher education had to contend with the compartmentalization in our approach to psychology, keeping personal and social life separated from the academic. This was an extension of school experiences, as academic study, science, history, and languages were set apart from and even “above” the informal, social, and cultural life at home. People even had “school names” and “home names” to keep the domains even more separate. Given the fact that socialization is guided by the capacity to have different positions in different contexts, a critical skill in multi-caregiver, multi-generational households, school became just an additional context which one had to learn to adapt to. Academic content and methods were seamlessly incorporated in the already large repertoire of activity settings, the private, the familial, the social, and the academic. Under the same principle, Psychology became another domain to pick up, not to be confused with personal and social activity.

Nowhere was this more evident than in missionary schools set up in the colonial era for the purpose of teaching local people. Many of the mission schools still thrive. Generations of Indian parents trusted the Christian missions with their children’s education to provide good education and training for a progressive outlook and modern ideology. Yet, for the children who passed through these institutions, at least that was my experience, there was a subtle though sustained attack on local cultural ways of living: language, beliefs, values, and ceremonies. Indirect encouragement of religious training was common, alongside the regular vilification of local culture

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.shiksha.com/humanities-social-sciences/psychology/colleges/colleges-india>

as outdated, superstitious, and contradictory to scientific thinking. For moral training, a syllabus of Moral Science was introduced that derived from Christian values. University education on the other hand was largely secular.

With the constant narrative of the superiority of Western science and culture, our generation was quick to appreciate Western philosophical ideas for inspiration while abandoning any mention of traditional Indian thought. In hindsight, it slowly dawned on me that school experience had distanced me from my family life and social circle and even resulted in creating a disdainful attitude toward everything local for a while. For my highest degrees at university, I was deeply inspired by my mentor Dr. S. Anandalakshmy who, despite her academic training in the West, remained deeply respectful of local cultural traditions. Her mentorship brought in new perspective on my suppressed ideas, and I began to better understand my own experiences in light of the local-global intersection and the injustice. I developed confidence to speak up against assumptions and attributions that did not seem right. The path became even more productive after my encounter with Jaan Valsiner in the 1990s after which a long and sustained collaboration followed, which still sustains.

## 5 Indian (Indigenous) Psychology

Once the cultural incompatibility between Western Psychology and Indian psychological themes began to be recognized, a campaign toward indigenizing psychology was initiated. The term Indian Psychology does not mean the Psychology of Indian people; it refers to an approach that is based on ideas and practices that developed in the subcontinent over millennia, deriving from classical Indian thought rooted in practices such as yoga (Rao, 2014), because the usage is analogous with Indian philosophy. Although some research in this field was initiated as early as the 1930s, activity intensified in 2002 when more than 150 psychologists issued a Manifesto. An extract:

We find psychology in India unable to play its necessary role in our national development. It is widely believed that this unfortunate state of affairs is largely due to the fact that psychology in India is essentially a Western transplant, unable to connect with the Indian ethos and concurrent community conditions. Therefore, it has been said repeatedly that psychological studies in India are by and large imitative and replicative of Western studies, lacking in originality and unable to cover or break any new ground.

Referring to the rich heritage in philosophical traditions, the document continues:

This situation is in a significant sense surprising because classical Indian thought is rich in psychological content. Our culture has given rise to a variety of practices that have relevance all the way from stress-reduction to self-realization. Rich in content, sophisticated in its methods and valuable in its applied aspects, Indian psychology is pregnant with possibilities for the birth of new models in psychology that would have relevance not only to India but also to psychology in general. What we have in India now is a psychology of sorts, but not Indian psychology.

Going on to explain what Indian Psychology is, the authors of the Manifesto explain that:

By Indian psychology we mean a distinct psychological tradition that is rooted in Indian ethos and thought, including the variety of psychological practices that exist in the country. We believe that introduction of Indian psychology as a course of study and as a basis for fundamental and applied research could awaken psychology in India from its present state of slumber to an active and enlightened pursuit for understanding human nature and for promoting our wellness and potential. We believe also that the Indian models of psychology would have enormous implications for health psychology, education, organizational management and human and social development. Emphasis on Indian psychology would provide a comprehensive foundation and a refreshing new and indigenous orientation to all other branches of psychology.<sup>2</sup>

The document concludes with an urgent instruction to Indian psychologists to consciously adopt, promote, teach, and publish ideas emerging from Indian Psychology. Topics addressed by Indian Psychology research and scholarship have included conceptions or processes relevant to values, personality, perception, cognition, emotion, creativity, education, and spirituality as well as applications, such as meditation, yoga, and Ayurveda, and case studies of prominent spiritual figures. Indian Psychology subscribes to methodological pluralism and especially emphasizes perspectives that pertain to a person's internal state of mind and consciousness with special emphasis on applications that promote positive changes in the human conditions toward well-being. Rather than being in contradiction, Indian Psychology views itself as complementary to modern psychology, capable of expanding the limits of psychology.

Following the 2002 Manifesto, the rewriting of the national curriculum of psychology was undertaken. However, many scholars considered this version of Indian Psychology too closely tied up with traditional Hindu spirituality and philosophy and therefore not representative of India as a whole. Besides this, the left-leaning community of academics too felt uncomfortable about the affiliation with religion and spirituality. The national curriculum is still a hotly debated topic.

Despite this enduring conflict, universities are changing, and psychology courses have started responding to the need for paying attention to culture and indigenous concepts and are readying to deploy qualitative methods. The academic systems are not only slow in adapting to new (old?) ways of thinking due to many reasons including systemic constraints; the deeply internalized colonization is still at work. We need to come to terms with reality and recognize the boundaries of pseudo-psychology by outgrowing the alien framework. The task of psychology needs to be to build alternative futures by working through culture at theoretical and methodological levels.

India has been home to several significant theories about the human condition, ranging from Vedanta philosophy to yoga and Buddhism, and religious sources have many profound ontological ideas. For centuries, these ideas have been bound within the imagination of the orient as a place inhabited by peculiar ideas. Placing these as

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<sup>2</sup>[https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/i\\_es/i\\_es\\_corne\\_manifesto\\_frameset.htm](https://www.infinityfoundation.com/mandala/i_es/i_es_corne_manifesto_frameset.htm)

exotic and unique manifestations of social history made it easier to dismiss these ideas as exotic and therefore not of much interest to philosophy. The Indian intellectual community that was left-leaning also participated in this campaign toward a secular discourse. As an outcome of colonialism, the traditions were submerged even deeper under the ground of modernity. However, in domestic and community experiences, many of these ideas have doggedly stayed relevant through practice and persistence. Some threads entered the academic field and even made an entry as Indian Indigenous Psychology, ideas that were earlier studied only by scholars interested in religion, culture, and language. Thus, Indian Psychology was enveloped in an externally created bubble as a Hindu, upper caste dominated field, to be eschewed by the scholarly community. A political debate about the use of Hindu ideas and ideals was rejected by many scholars.

Even today, philosophy courses in Indian universities spend more time on Greek philosophers than on Hindu ideas. In this regard, India's own plurality has been a further impediment to the integration of Hindu philosophy into academic study, since it is seen as external to India's multi-culturalism. The battle between secularism and fundamentalism has been counterproductive for advancements in Indian Psychology. Yet, when we search within, there is a wealth of ideas on the human condition, intersubjectivity, collective wisdom, and the human psyche. Ideas expressed in the Sanskrit language are often inadequately or erroneously translated into the English language.

## **6 Cultural Psychology as a Solution to the Impasse Between Indian Psychology and Global Science**

In this adventure across borders and boundaries and attributions and assumptions, Cultural Psychology arrived with an invitation for a genuine dialogue within a level playing field, proposing a path for a dialogical, dynamic relationship between culture and person. Every person can express uniqueness despite being guided within cultural-social worlds, and every collective arrangement of ideas is more than the sum of its components. Cultural Psychology finally offered a possibility to understand both person and culture without either upward or downward reduction (Valsiner, 1996, p. 443). From being pushed aside as indigenous, seductive, or peculiar, it was a relief and then an inspiration to find a rightful place at the round table where genuine dialogue was possible. Cultural locations were places which provided important instances in the search for knowledge about human psychological processes, if only one had the appropriate perspectives, approaches, and methods; but one needed courage to pursue this path. For Indian psychologists struggling with labels of indigeneity, peculiarity, and relativism, on the one hand, and standard, global, "scientific" ideas, on the other, Cultural Psychology has been the potential in charting a way forward from these apparently irreconcilable positions.

As discussed earlier, it was in the 1960s and 1970s that the issue of relevance of knowledge was raised and attention was directed to the challenges faced by the Indian society. The cross-cultural psychology movement at the international level provided opportunity to the Indian colleagues to explore certain aspects of psychological processes in a culturally situated manner, toward the search for cultural similarities and differences. Unfortunately, the concern remained tied to the exploration of the generalizability of Western theory and methods, and Western Psychology remained at the central position from which other cultures would be compared. There were very few instances of what we can label as horizontal collaborations (Sinha, 1990). This limitation paved the way for the emergence of cultural psychological approaches, indigenization, and indigenous psychology movements, which allowed the fundamental role of culture in constructing psychological processes to be examined.

The debate between the promoters of a Hindu Psychology and the rest of the academic community in Psychology persists. Additionally, the fragmented sub-disciplines of organizational, clinical, developmental, and other fields also prevent a consolidated action, as each sub-discipline breaks out into their own groups. It seems easier for people to continue with the fragmentated borders that are manageable, not realizing that the concerted action in response to global psychology is lost with these internal debates.

Cultural Psychology is a group of approaches that share a common interest in explaining how human psychological functioning is expressed in relations between persons, their meanings constructions, and their social contexts. In this sense, culture in the collective manifestation is seen as meaning-making, semiotic mediation, values, attitudes, folk models, and social representations. Culture is also re-imagined by individuals in their subjective realms as *personal culture* (Valsiner, 2014). The unity of internal and external cultural formations guide individuals in engagement with, but are not reducible to, collective patterns. The co-constructive dynamics between culture and individual minds is a key principle of how culture and person are understood in Cultural Psychology. Because psychological phenomena are understood as evolving within the context of the social setting at a given point in time, and not as immutable features of individual mentality, Cultural Psychology facilitates the embrace of cultural difference without falling into the trap of extreme cultural relativism.

Given this reasoning, I believe that Cultural Psychology as a discipline, in which Jaan Valsiner has been a pioneer and mentor for several Indian psychologists, offers us a concerted, consolidated alternative which can help to solve several obstacles that the discipline is faced with today, providing a viable, generalizable alternative that accepts and recognizes “culture” without being bound by specifics: an acceptable solution to the internal disagreements since it does not affiliate itself with any specific culture, but rather includes the dynamics of cultural processes which will facilitate the investigation of local ideas, and provides a future-oriented solution to the study of human sciences in collaboration with other disciplines.

## 7 Final Words

Although India as a country is just seven decades old, India as an idea is ancient (Khilnani, 1997/2004). Colonization caused a separation of domestic and formal institutions, creating a functional multiplicity. Given the fact that socialization practices facilitate comfort with multiplicity, Westernization became one other theme in the variety of existing ways. With this background, Psychology was built by scholars returning with foreign training. The separation of academic and personal life found yet another domain of expression. The entry of cross-cultural psychology increased collaborations and the study of Indians to look carefully at cultural specifics, and scholars began to realize the complete absence of attention to indigenous ideas. Indian Psychology emerged as a reaction to the ill-suited mainstream. This indigenization initiated by a group of Indian scholars was not accepted by everyone, leading to a major debate in the community. Many branches like Clinical Psychology remained outside of the debate as they had a separate forum for discussions about culture and psyche. The argument for resisting “Indian Psychology” was because it was seen as an imposition of fundamentalist Hindu, upper caste ideology, not inclusive of India’s plurality. This has led to an impasse. My contention is that Cultural Psychology offers Indian Psychology a way out of this deadlock and provides a productive resolution to the conflict. From “acculturation to pro-culturation, cultural psychology explains developmental processes through the modulation of psychological distance through signs, building models of dialogical relationships socially asymmetric role relations, and of the affective textures of everyday living. These are all processes of higher-order complexity that require new ways of conceptualizing methodology in psychology – one that prioritizes theoretically based model construction over those of consensually established ‘tool-boxes’” (Valsiner, 2019, 429). Lifting psychological phenomena out of tool boxes and cultural processes out of text boxes, the scholarship of Jaan Valsiner has been successful in liberating culture from being bound by location and the individual from being bound by measurement. Thus, Cultural Psychology carries an advantage over other versions of the subject because it considers prospects, of real as well as possible conditions. For countries outside the Western frame, this inclusion of variations, real and imagined, is a thoroughly liberating framework, one that frees Indian Psychology from its position as a set of indigenous ideas applicable only to Indians.

*“The new era of global openness for contacts between human beings across borders of national, social or religious kind sets up a new opportunity for the social sciences to expand their understanding to include the varieties of cultural histories into their scientific cores.”*  
(Valsiner, 2017)

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# The Collective Making of a General Psychology of Culture



Jakob W. Villadsen and Pernille Hviid

## 1 Introduction

All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. (Marx, 1888)

Over the last decades, Jaan Valsiner has played an important role in our work, concerning both our research and the establishment our research group on Cultural Life Course studies in Copenhagen. From our experience, the theoretical credo in all of Jaan's work is the notion of cultural psychology as the general science of the human being (e.g., see Valsiner et al. 2016), and for that, we will be forever indebted. However, we wish to highlight Jaan's practical credo of including all kinds of humans and all kinds of human issues, in order to approach to the production of knowledge. Jaan has not only been a tremendous inspiration in developing ideas, projects, theories, and concepts in various contexts, but just as much an inspiration in terms of *how* to develop ideas, projects, theories, and concepts. Jaan's way of making this happen points to a constructive nexus between the practice of the human researcher, the scientific society, and the self-identity of the discipline, and that is what we wish to examine.

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303

## 2 Globalization of Cultural Psychology

Our collaboration with Jaan has brought us to India, Brazil, China, Japan, the Netherlands, and Aalborg. We have been part of workshops, seminars, conferences, and summer schools. We have addressed issues such as remembering, education, landscape paintings, revolutions, world wars, and challenges for various indigenous groups. Jaan has been involved in even greater variety of issues and geographical locations. This might sound as an exotic, chaotic, and random approach to producing new knowledge, but it has been part of a greater idea of globalizing and democratizing cultural psychology. However, the ethos in this globalization and democratization have been straightforward in including scientific issues and researchers outside of the cultural heritages of North America and Europe transforming cultural psychology into a psychology of culture in general and not just one for the privileged.

A recognition of each unit as part of the whole is an important step not “just” in terms of equality but also in a genuine understanding of the unity of the whole. What unites cultural psychologies is not the kind or degree of culture, but the fact that human beings are cultural in their nature. That human beings are “cultural in their nature” points back to a foundational understanding of the relation between human beings and their surroundings as inclusively separated and evolving in historical time:

Here culture becomes exemplified through different processes by which persons relate with their worlds. If the person and environment are considered as inclusively separated, culture is considered as a process of internalization and externalization or mutual constituting between person and the social world (Shweder & Much, 1987). If the researcher decides to introduce a boundary between person and the social world (e.g., Rogoff, 1990; 2003; Wertsch, 1998), the process of culture becomes elaborated in terms of appropriation, guided participation, or mastery. Culture here “is” these posited processes, rather than an entity. (Valsiner, 2007, p. 10)

This not only brings back human beings and their experiences to the core of the science concerning human beings, but it also reinstates the human researcher and the human practices in the enterprise of this science. Thus, the approach to construct new knowledge does build not only on an ethical stand of equality but also on an epistemic idea that challenges the traditional dominance of ideas, inviting new people as producers and consumers of knowledge (Valsiner, 2009).

## 3 Dialogues as Means of Abstraction: One Case and Multiple Projects

We could describe numerous events, kitchen meetings, seminars, sessions, summer schools, or research projects, but in this context, we have settled with two. The first followed directly from Jaan’s Niels Bohr Professorship grant at Alborg University, and the second evolved in relation to a network grant we received together with Jaan and others who resided at universities outside Denmark.

As Danes settled in Copenhagen, we were of course overjoyed (and proud) that Jaan moved to Denmark, although admittedly jealous that he was not in Copenhagen. For Jaan however, the location was perfect, and we learned to love it too. The love grew in particular from the yearly Niels Bohr Professorships Lectures<sup>1</sup> held in February as a 2-day seminar, with guests from all over the world, blended with a proportionally big number of Danish colleagues from all five universities and in particular from Aalborg University. The seminars centered on a key presentation that was put online beforehand and a number of invited lectures addressing the theme of the keynote, but through very diverse dimensions of extending, comparing, demonstrating, and/or criticizing it. The discussions across the lecture hall were lengthy, interesting, and humorous. The dinner was excellent, and the nights were long. As soon as the arrangement was over, a process of publication started. All participants, speakers or audience and students or professors, were invited to contribute to the publication, which had a very short production period, as it should be ready to hand out at the next seminar, precisely 1 year after.

The first seminar was a direct tribute to Niels Bohr and focused on “Complementarity in a new key” (Wagoner, Chaudhary & Hviid, 2014) where Jaan offered the keynote. In the second, Tania Zittoun and Alex Gillespie (2015) joined forces and demonstrated at several levels the promises of “Integrating Experiences.” One central argument in their keynote was that the relation between mind and society generates through movement, as both a spatial and psychological phenomenon. The dataset on which they built and examined their argument consisted of a diary, which is part of the Mass Observation Archive in the UK, established in 1939. Diarist no. 5324, here named June, documented her experiences almost daily from 1939, when she was 18 years of age, until its end in 1945.

The volume “Integrating experiences – body and mind moving through contexts” (Wagoner, Chaudhary & Hviid, 2015) consisted beyond the keynote of three sections of chapters of which we can only mention a few. The first section worked with “history” (e.g., Abbey & Pfeffercorn, 2015) and “context” (e.g., Markova, 2015) as foundational conceptualizations in cultural psychology. The second picked up particular central conceptualizations from the keynote such as “experience, time and movement” (e.g., Larrain, 2015, Stenner, 2015). In the last section, the authors investigated methodological questions rising from the keynote on, e.g., the use of diaries (Grossen, 2015), generalization from single case studies (Valsiner, 2015), and researchers’ positioning (Martin, 2015).

Gillespie and Zittoun (2015) wrote a reply to the contributions, a piece of work the authors considered “incredibly productive.” It gave them not only opportunities to clarify and elaborate on their assumptions and arguments but, as many chapters raised fundamental questions of existence, freedom, mortality, and the ethic of otherness, also a sense of consolidation that they were “homing in on important issues.”

Because of the richness and accessibility of the data, it was possible for many of the contributing authors to offer complementary analysis, with either the same or a

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<sup>1</sup>For organizing these yearly events, we would in particular thank Brady Wagoner.

different theoretical lens, such as dialogicality, position exchange, and trajectory equifinality models. As Gillespie and Zittoun pointed out, such multi-perspectivism not only serves the understanding of the concrete case of June but also works as a means of integrating theoretical approaches and can thus be considered as a step toward generalization. In other words, the various authors were saying something different, and yet they talked about the same, which in our perspective added to the meaningfulness and productivity of the dialogues.

This second volume was in its ethos a natural prolongation of Jaan's lecture in the first seminar, which had Niels Bohr's concept of complementarity as the starting point and the quest of moving beyond the recognition of the complementary perspective toward a synthesis as its fulcrum. Such ethos is in itself an enormous achievement, since the seminar consisted of researchers from all over Europe, Asia, and North and South America and included a huge variation of theoretical perspectives and empirical contexts (educational, clinical, science and technology, neurology, etc.).

The ethos of the academic production was embedded in an ethos of a grander scale in the organization of the various practices at the seminar as a whole. It was common that all guests were accommodated at the same hotel and that the seminar practice already began at breakfast, where many from the "Aalborg gang" joined in and filled the restaurant. They did so to eat and to help the guest to the campus, but most of all to participate in the informal dialogues on the themes from the day before and for the day to come. These dialogues were crucial in facilitating the formal academic dialogue, and they were ever-present during the seminars; sometimes the breaks between the lectures were longer than the talks, and the level of academic arousal was higher in the lobby than in the lecture hall. In these informal contexts, researchers came to know each other as "people doing research" and not just as being researchers. They (we) became acquainted with different perspectives and thematically varied entrance points to the seminar – in terms of the labels we, as academics, use to portray ourselves with – but through the dialogues, the acquaintances changed into recognition of the other as a different part, yet a part of the same whole united in the effort of conceptualizing human meaning-making. As Stout and Baldwin explain:

All generalization involves abstraction; to generalize is to recognize likeness which had been previously masked by differences; to recognize the likeness is also therefore to recognize these differences as irrelevant, and to disregard them from the point of view of the general conception. Such recognition is abstraction. (Stout and Baldwin, 1901, p. 408)

Such recognition is, we claim, not merely a product of an intellectual task, but deeply embedded in human practices where abstraction becomes meaningful means of genuine dialogues with and to the other. Coming to know each other as a human being and understanding why and how the other's practice makes sense in her/his context does not necessarily imply this kind of abstraction. However, such genuine dialogues can operate as catalyzers for recognizing the other in a fuller sense, which can lead to friendship, sharing of ideas, or collaboration on a project. All these dimensions are important elements of the human (research) practice.

In this case, we have reasoned that if the practice of data sharing should be a productive meaningful activity, it needs to include the sharing of practices producing data and not only the data itself. Human beings produce data, and within cultural psychology, data usually concerns the practices of human beings. Thus, sharing of data involves at least two levels of human practice, in need of being both shared and analyzed. Dialogues are important means here, but as we shall see in the next case, experiencing the practice and context of the other researcher brings another level to the process of abstraction.

#### **4 Partnership as Mean for Generalization: Multiple Cases and One Project**

The second case rose from a network grant, which gave us opportunity to join some of the international centers (here universities in Brazil and China) with which Jaan was already well acquainted or directly collaborated. Our application promised that we would focus on “Innovation of life through Education.” Based on this aspiration, we aimed at investigating the life and education in the broadest sense of the concept, focusing on variation as the strategical mean toward a general conceptual understanding – rather than representation of the average, which is commonly used in educational matters (Hviid & Martsin, 2019).

In Brazil, we joined a group of scholars at São Paulo University and a group of scholars at UFBA in Salvador de Bahia. On both occasions, our interaction was not solely restricted to the conference room, presentations, and discussions, we joined local debates and teaching at the universities, and we were taken out to experience things, which for various reasons mattered to the hosts. We visited a community of Amerindians; we listened to, saw, smelled, and tasted glimpses of their daily life. We moved around with them. We saw the outline of the educational center they were about to build in the community. They awaited accept from authorities to develop an education with roots and perspective of the indigenous community. The “school” labeling of an institution is an enormous step for any minority community (in academia and in society in general), in terms of both its survival and its recognition (Lima et al., 2019).

We also visited Acervo da Laje, located in Subúrbio Ferroviário, a very poor and vulnerable railroad outskirts of Salvador with approximately 500,000 inhabitants. The initiative of Acervo da Laje grew out as a response to the constant negative narratives of the community, which highlighted poverty, drugs, violence, and crime, often displayed by the local social media, but encapsulated worldwide in the name: favela. The prime forces behind Acervo da Laje, Eduardo and Wilma Santos, have not only built a local museum for the “Invisible art of the beauty workers on the periphery of Salvador”; they also conduct workshops with community members of all ages, an education for beauty and sensitivity and developmental poetics. Santos argues that work with artistic expressions creates cultural resources (and resilience)

on both collective and personal levels. Thus seen, artistic production is understood as a cultural means for empowerment, for counteracting stigmatization, and for dissemination of alternative narratives of what one calls “home” (Santos, 2019).

Obviously, the Brazilian location and the educational projects deviated from the cold Scandinavian context with its welfare structure and its rather homogenized day-care and school that we as researchers normally work with. The projects had very different conditions, and the stakes were higher, sometime the highest. Through being there, experiencing the cultural richness in terms of creativity and traditions in the face of great disadvantage, we realized that some processes and dynamics were quite similar to our own research context. Although children’s collective culture is valued in the Danish society, it is still a minority and heavily influenced by distant power and interests. Although Danish children do not struggle for their lives and survival of their lives, they do struggle under the standardization of their lives and the survival of their subjectivity (Villadsen & Hviid, 2016; Villadsen, 2019). As such, aspects of the general process of cultivation became prominent to our perspective through experiencing the processes in a new context and with a new configuration.

Any new configuration makes impressions of its own and raises question concerning the concrete project. It is based on exactly these impressions and questions that the general emerges from the concrete and unique case. *Generality in uniqueness is not a contradiction in terms*, but the basic operating principle in all nature, *psyche*, and society (original iteratives) (Salvatore and Valsiner, 2010, p. 820).

In China, we worked with a group of educational and developmental psychologist at East China Normal University. Our focus was teaching arrangements and learning expectations and outcome. As in Brazil, we were invited to experience educational arrangements we have never seen the like, but a simple exchange of information ended having profound importance for our further collaboration. On one occasion, Chinese researchers presented preschool and school arrangements that guaranteed maximum academic performance by the students, at almost all costs, “... the kind of school you prefer,” they explained us, the Western researchers. We heard ourselves reply, “We thought it was you, who wanted that kind of school.”

Traveling and experiencing each other’s research “sites” gave rise to such kind of questions, and knowing the other as part of an overall “WE” promoted dialogues on the basis of the subordinated “US” and “THEM.” We were together in this project, part of the same tradition, sharing a collective practice, and thus part of the same whole. Yet, we were different parts of the same and thus de facto both a like and different. The experience of such a connectedness or entanglement (to use the word of Niels Bohr) is different from understanding it logically. However, it is the core of the research process when considering it as an abductive practice. As Peirce explained:

Abduction, in the sense I give the word, is any reasoning of a large class of which the provisional adoption of an explanatory hypothesis is the type. But it includes processes of thought which lead only to the suggestion of questions to be considered, and includes much besides. (Peirce, 1974, p 428 Note 4.541)

In abduction, the constructive processes of forming ideas and generating new questions are inseparable parts in the process of forming general theoretical concepts. Variation within the parts of the whole naturally generates questioning between these

parts, and collaborate efforts to overcome (not eradicate) such questions can lead to dynamic transformation of the whole. In this sense, the construction of theory is based on variation and relationships of differences, rather than on uniformity and sameness:

Abduction is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis. It is the only logical operation that introduces any new idea; for induction does nothing but determine a value, and deduction merely evolves the necessary consequences of a pure hypothesis. (Peirce 1998, p. 216)

Collaborating in academia is most often based on sameness rather than on differences. Research projects are usually *united* by one theoretical perspective, the use of the one methodology, and the use of the same empirical contexts. This can of course produce important knowledge, but it also includes a risk of black boxing its own foundation and narrowing its further development, since it only includes concluding steps in the scientific reasoning:

Abduction seeks a theory. Induction seeks for facts. In abduction the consideration of the facts suggests the hypothesis. In induction the study of the hypothesis suggests the experiments which bring to light the very facts to which the hypothesis had pointed. (Peirce, 1998, p. 106)

In generating and re-negotiating hypothesis with researchers who have diverse, theoretical, and geographical backgrounds, one's life-beliefs and life-habits (to use Peirce's concepts) as well as one's research-beliefs and research-habits are challenged and doubted. This generates the potential for new ideas due to the dynamic nature of the whole, and it protects from turning ideas into blunt opinions.

Contrary to Pierce's notion of abduction (which insisted on the primacy of formal logic (Pizarroso and Valsiner, 2009)), Jaan's conceptualization of abduction includes the notion of irreversibility of time as an axiom of knowledge production. This acknowledges that the experience of any singular event always is a unique configuration in time and space; it is always differentiation and integration in the adductive production of knowledge and includes step of generalization. By perceiving the unique experience of an event as an expression of similarity (of experiences) implies a generalization of these experiences into distinguishable "time segments." These make it possible to move to generalizations of the qualities of the phenomenon that are more abstract across the various time segments. The differences between different time segments become eliminated by "realizing" that they are variations of the same general principle (Valsiner, 2017).

Hence, generalizations are processes of abstraction, which constructs static similarities of the unstoppable movement into the future. At the temporal level, the general conceptualizations move from being of *differences* to being of *variation*. At the level of qualities, general conceptualizing move from being of *similarities* toward being of *re-constructed sameness*. Such movements are only possible because of the dependent interdependency at the temporal level – the researcher's experience is dependent of the past (as time-free abstractions) and the constraints of the present, while the uncertainty of the future indicates degrees of freedom of creativity (Valsiner, 2017). Abduction within this temporal framework is always progressing, even under the condition in which conceptual qualities remain the same, since the "remaining the same" is a re-constructed sameness under the accumulation of time

segments. Thus, abduction is always moving beyond the established past and is expressed either as an accumulative form (integrating variation in the form of time segments) or as generative form (transforming or developing new abstract constructs of qualities) (Valsiner, 2017).

In the volume that grew out of the collaboration with Brazilian and Chinese researchers, Marian Märtsin joined the editorial process and, with her, Australian educational researchers. The book invited for a discussion on “tensioned dialogues and creative constructions” (Hviid & Märtsin, 2019) in the mutual creation of education and culture. Our point of departure was a concern that the educational aims and goals to a growing extent are detached from values of societies, practices, and traditions of communities and engagements of the young persons, attending these arrangements. In some absurd sense, we argued, “we are all becoming marginalized groups in a global competitive educational abstractum” (Märtsin & Hviid, 2019, p. xi). We opted for another way of learning from each other than by comparison and competition, the fuel of the educational “abstractum.” We needed varied, rich local cases, showing tensions and creativity in shaping culturally speaking, sustainable education in sustainable communities.

The volume included authors of indigenous people of Australia and Brazil, and Eastern and Western researchers. The cases examined included extremely poor and excessively rich communities, and education in communities that possessed enormous power or suffered from structural powerlessness. The chapters were published side by side in order to examine dynamics of meaning-making in education, examined in the light of, e.g. exploitation, disempowerment and resources, creativity, resistance and sustainability. We proposed to take tension as well as generativity as fundamentals of any cultural developmental system, but suggested a distinction between constructive and antagonistic approaches (Hviid & Märtsin, 2019b). Across the strong and weak and the rich and poor cases, an antagonistic approach tended to place the challenge of adaptation on the shoulders of the Other. In so doing, education lost its universal promise of enrichment and cultivation and risked rendering the whole enterprise into something useless or worse, retaliating resistance. Instead of simply criticizing the powerful current machinery of using global standardized methods to compare and compete, we aimed at taking steps toward a general educational methodology. Implicit in moving from evidence-based methods to general methodology is a move from introducing the endpoint to educational practices toward supporting the comprehension of the unique challenges and resources as expressions of general principles. This move makes it possible to draw on (not copy) the experience of others.

The mere writing of the book was in itself a challenge. The book was in English, which was the native language of only a few authors. As a volume addressing academia, it had formats that fitted poorly with Aboriginal ways of communicating and dealing with complex issues. Yarning is a spiral or cyclic way of examining challenges through narratives, and that does not align with the Western academic genre. Amerindians discard the written language as “white peoples” language. We shared the concern of this powerful bottleneck to publication of science and joining the academic

community while maintaining our focus on the collective aim of wanting to work together.

## 5 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have presented experiences of working with Jaan in various scientific practices, with the purpose of relating the practice and the knowledge production. The aim has been to highlight the importance of social relations and social organizations of scientific work, as well as the practical experience with the Other through participation, at all levels, in their scientific practice. The general argument has been that human beings carry out research and, in framing the scientific work as dialogues between humans, it naturally overcomes counterproductive discussions between different research perspectives in favor of understanding how differences make the collective develop as a whole.

Moreover, we have stressed the importance of experiencing the Other's research context when collaborating, as a means to overcome "differences" or rather to develop an understanding of differences as unique expressions of the general principles of the phenomenon. We have argued that the generative process of making new ideas within this frame can be conceptualized as an abductive process, where the experience of differences, doubt, and ambivalence challenge the beliefs and habits of the subjects' scientific practices, which may lead the research community toward new ways of understanding, conceptualizing, and doing research.

In doing so, we have elaborated on a dimension of our collaboration with Jaan, which is, we reckon, different from what is normally highlighted in Jaan's work: his theoretical thinking and innovation, which has contributed to developmental psychology, cultural psychology, and psychological thinking in general. We have attempted to move beyond the (admittedly) "great thinking" of the scientist and capture, what could be named as a *practice methodology of theoretical innovation*. From our experience, the very foundation of Jaan's quest of generating new general conceptualizations of human meaning-making is the credo of collaboration and dialogism as the only sustainable methodological way forward – not in terms of a specific set of methods or through sharing projects, but in terms of collective practices as the foundation for scientific work. We are hopeful in that such a practice sets a new possible direction for psychology in general and culture psychology in particular.

*"If it does not lose itself in criticism and polemics, if it does not turn into a paper war [war with pamphlets] but rises to a methodology, if it does not search for ready-made answers, and if it understands the tasks of contemporary psychology, then it will lead to the creation of a theory of psychological materialism."* (Vygotsky, 1997/1927 p. 332)

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<sup>2</sup>With the concept of materialism, Vygotsky is not pointing toward a mechanical materialism. On the contrary, Vygotsky himself perceives the dialectic scheme as the frame for psychological thinking, and by using the word materialism, he is simply refusing the metaphysic frame and points toward psychology as an empirical science.

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# The Relationalism of Jaan Valsiner



Danilo Silva Guimarães

Jaan was my supervisor when I was a Ph.D. student visiting Clark University for 6 months in the Autumn/Winter of 2008 and 2009. During this period I saw and felt the snow for the first time, and among other lived singular personal experiences and self-discoveries, the opportunity to get the collaboration in the Kitchen Seminars of the cultural psychology research network Jaan led. It was exciting and defined my academic trajectory. From this period, I kept important academic partners and very good friends. The number and the quality of references Jaan proposed us to read in order to go further in our reflections, the bunch of books and photocopying in the living room of his apartment, was the scenery for meaningful discussions on topics of general psychology and future perspectives for young researchers. Since then, I'm aware that it is impossible to follow the rhythm of his intellectual suggestions and abundant productions. Therefore, to prepare this commentary, I decided to select few aspects of his recent work that articulates his understanding of culture as a process and my personal work in the border of cultural and indigenous psychologies.

The excerpt of my Ph.D. dissertation prepared to discuss in the Kitchen Seminar at Clark University was about an effort to create dialogue between notions of perspective from the dialogical approach of the semiotic-cultural constructivism in psychology and in the anthropological theory of Amerindian perspectivism. The label semiotic-cultural constructivism in psychology emerged from the work of my advisor at the University of São Paulo, professor Lívia Mathias Simão, as a perspective to reflect on qualitative methods, specially, research-participant interaction. She included in her studies selected philosophical grounds to psychological knowledge construction, i.e., the notions of dialogue from Bakhtin; hermeneutics, from Gadamer; and alterity from Levinas (cf. Simão, 2010). The issue of alterity and the

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difference of perspectives in the dialogue interested me, since my undergraduate studies. Nevertheless, I had few opportunities to turn my indigenous roots as a theme for dialogue in the university and social environment I lived in, until I got to know the studies from the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro. Then, I focused on the interdisciplinary dialogue considering these frameworks in my research project. To my surprise, when I visited Clark University, Jaan already knew the work of the anthropologist and showed me one of his important books written in English.

The anthropological theory of Amerindian perspectivism departed from the understanding that the European philosophy emerged as a reflection based on the lifestyle of the European man, as an elaboration started from the rites and myths of peoples that constituted the European societies. Then, through a reflection considering the rites and myths of the Amerindian peoples, we could produce distinct philosophical concepts. Following this reflexive procedure and from the construction of rigorous ethnographic data, anthropologists led or influenced by Viveiros de Castro works identify and analyze the equivoques of translation concerning a number of topics of Amerindian elaborations. The equivoques happen when they are interpreted from exotic perspectives (as usually the scientific, anthropological, or psychological, for instance), which are not consistently informed by the ontological ground of Amerindian traditions (cf. Viveiros de Castro, 2004). The equivoques are inherent to the dialogue between different beings, who do not participate in kinship processes, demanding specific procedures for the construction of mutual understanding or collaboration.<sup>1</sup> The analyzed topics of Amerindian elaborations involve, especially, those related to the role of the body in the construction of the person, identities, and alterities (cf. Lagrou, 2007; Lima, 1996, 1999, 2005; Morais, 2017; Pierri, 2018; Pissolato, 2007; Vilaça, 2006; Viveiros de Castro, 2006).

One of the first and main reflections in the framework of Amerindian perspectivism is that the distinction between nature and culture cannot be used to describe domains internal to the focused indigenous cosmologies, implying:

[...] a redistribution of the predicates subsumed within the two paradigmatic sets that traditionally oppose one another under the headings of 'Nature' and 'Culture': universal and particular, objective and subjective, physical and social, fact and value, the given and the instituted, necessity and spontaneity, immanence and transcendence, body and mind, animality and humanity, among many more. (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, pp. 469–470)

From Amerindian reflections, unfolding them, the anthropologist proposed, as one of the contrasting features of Amerindian thought, that the indigenous do not apprehend or reflect about the environment that surrounds them presupposing the unity of nature given by the objective universality of body and substance. Besides, they do not understand the relation between human beings and societies as based on the plurality of cultures, subjective particularity of psyche and meaning. Rather, the

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<sup>1</sup> See an expanded discussion of the issues concerning dialogue, translation, and equivoques in Achatz and Guimarães (2018) and Guimarães (2020).

Amerindian multinaturalism (in contrast with the Western conceptions of cultural pluralism and natural monism) proposes a relational ontology:

Kinship terms are relational pointers; they belong to the class of nouns that define something in terms of its relations to something else (linguists have special names for such nouns—“two-place predicates” and such like). Concepts like fish or tree, on the other hand, are proper, self-contained substantives: they are applied to an object by virtue of its intrinsic properties. Now, what seems to be happening in Amerindian perspectivism is that substances named by substantives like fish, snake, hammock, or beer are somehow used as if they were relational pointers, something halfway between a noun and a pronoun, a substantive and a deictic. (There is supposedly a difference between “natural kind” terms such as fish and “artifact” terms such as hammock: a subject worth more discussion later.) You are a father only because there is another person whose father you are. Fatherhood is a relation, while fishiness is an intrinsic property of fish. In Amerindian perspectivism, however, something is a fish only by virtue of someone else whose fish it is. (Viveiros de Castro, 2004, pp. 472–473)

The issue of the social construction of objective and subjective realities is not a novelty to the European phenomenological philosophy and sociology in the twentieth century (see, for instance, Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Nevertheless, considering the Amerindian perspectivism, the ontological issues acquire intensities and qualities that unbalance the naturalist ontology modern sciences and psychology are mostly based.

This paper argues that the cultural psychology of Jaan Valsiner is permeable to the dialogue with Amerindian cosmologies in the sense that it presents a sort of relational ontology, although this issue is not directly addressed in his main works. The present discussion continues with Jaan’s mentions to ontology in a selected approach to his works, since the immensity of his work, to a large extent, I have not yet been able to study.

## 1 Ontological Issues, Excluded or Included from Cultural Psychology

The “ontological look” has been criticized in some of the recent publications of Valsiner (cf. 2017a, 2017b, 2019a, 2020). Ontology appears as opposed to his developmental approach, since it makes psychological dynamic process static and the ontologization of terms of everyday life into pseudoscientific concepts tricks the psychologist as much as the treatment of pseudoconcepts as if they were causal entities (Valsiner and Brinkmann, 2016). Besides, he asserts that “anthropology faces a crisis when its ideology of treating cultures as ontologically stable entities is challenged by the migratory movement of people between countries” (Valsiner, 2017a, p. 141) and such ontological look “is a time-freed epistemological stance” (p. 321). Constructing psychological theories as point-like schemes, referring to visible or invisible and existing or non-existing entities, is a problem. Researchers, actually, construct semiotic elaboration about investigated processes. The *products* of semiotic elaboration transform in the infinite *process* cultural psychology addresses:

All experiencing axiomatically happens in irreversible time and is regulated by signs. Signs allow human beings to create notions of extended present ranging from milliseconds to eternity. In the latter case the constructed static time—the notion of time as a sign—creates the illusion of freedom from irreversible time. That sign construction makes all non-developmental perspectives possible. To study human minds in their static form, psychology first gets rid of irreversible time. This happens through signs the notion of the present is extended infinitely both to the future and to the past. The result is disappearance of time as a sign. [...] Ontologies are constructed, not given, entities. Developmental perspective in psychology is the general starting point for all non-developmental perspectives—not vice versa. (Valsiner, 2017a, pp. 320–321)

In fact, Valsiner does not appear to reject ontology as the philosophical study “about general valid statements of the world” (cf. Klempe, 2016, p. 86). He rejects the ontology of static, solid givens, in favor of a dialogical and relational ontology (cf. Raudsepp, 2017). Possibly this rejection extends to the comprehension of ontology as a demarcation criterion between philosophy and psychology. For Klempe (2016), philosophy includes ontology, while psychology does not. They are two different fields of knowledge, and psychology does not have to include philosophical considerations, especially those that concern ontology. This division is crucial when it comes to a discussion on the distinction between natural and artificial (or cultural) borders. Klempe (2016) argues that this border is quite irrelevant seen from a psychological perspective, since the question about natural versus artificial borders belongs to ontology, in the sense that they are supposed to exist as given entities. Nevertheless, important from this perspective is the way borders are defined, in terms of distinctions or in terms of oppositions:

[...] ‘distinctions’ presuppose a kind of reality and therefore belong to philosophy, whereas ‘oppositions’ are a result of differences in affective loadings and therefore rather highlights the psychological perspective on borders. However the most important consequence of this investigation is that a psychological understanding of meaning has to be quite different from a philosophical understanding of meaning. (Klempe, 2016, p. 89)

The reflection of Klempe about the role of ontological issues in psychology is distinct from the reflection of Simão (2016) who keeps the difference between philosophy and psychology but does not discard the relevance of ontology in psychological discussions, particularly in the dialogue between philosophy and psychology. For her, the ontological reflection focuses the universal aspects of the human being, while psychology regards the particularity of concrete living persons, as it is an idiographic science:

[...] ontological issues ask for the nature of the subject-other-world relationships that allow the subject’s constitution and transformation; they call for the predication of the being, which unfolds in meaningful aspects that distinguish a psychological subject from all other instances that are not it in different psychologies. (Simão, 2016, p. 572)

In this sense, an ontology of facticity or eventfulness, which regards subjectivity constituting and being constituted in time, is the background for cultural psychology, because the disregard of temporality—in Valsiner’s terms, “the disappearance of time as a sign”—is an ontological issue that directly affects theoretical and methodological paths of psychological research and knowledge construction.

Simão's semiotic-cultural constructivism emphasizes that the awareness of its kinship with philosophical reflections is relevant to psychological research, taking into account that psychological theories are neither sufficiently constructed from strict induction from empirical data nor a result of rational-deductive derivation from ontological premises:

[...] the word, like the sun in a drop of water, fully reflects the processes and tendencies in the development of a science. A certain fundamental unity of knowledge in science comes to light which goes from the highest principles to the selection of a word. What guarantees this unity of the whole scientific system? The fundamental methodological skeleton. The investigator, insofar as he is not a technician, a registrar, an executor, is always a philosopher who during the investigation and description is thinking about the phenomena, and his way of thinking is revealed in the words he uses. (Vygotski, 1927)

From this perspective, philosophy and knowledge construction are embraced in psychology. The reflection about the scientific system depends on a task that includes more than investigation and description of data, that is, the construction of coherent integration with predications assumed by the researcher.

Next to the epistemological and ontological philosophical reflections, we find the ethical concerns. Figueiredo (1996/2013) distinguishes two ways the term ethics can be used, as a noun or as an adjective. As a noun, ethics refers to implicit patterns or explicit codes of conduct that prescribe or forbid human actions or behavior as much as the modes of implication and obedience of someone to the socially convened rules. Some cultural fields are stricter or more rigid or flexible, accepting one or multiple interpretations of the rule. As an adjective, ethics refers to an existential dimension concerning the relations between humans and between humans and other beings and the environment. It implies a value-oriented attitude to the others and the world, next to the necessary or efficient goals of human actions:

[...] in the choice and evaluation of legitimately desirable goals and in the choice of legitimate forms of interactive action, not only or mainly the agent's survival will be at stake, but also, their image and their esteem before others and before themselves. Effectively, there is always a reflexivity, a self-addressed relationship, a subject's self-commitment, involved in ethical conduct. (Figueiredo, 1996/2013, p. 66)

The etymology of the word ethics goes back to the Greek notion of *ethos*, used to designate human ways of being and relating. Figueiredo (1996/2013) discusses it as a mode of propitiating, configuring, shaping, and constructing people and their worlds, including socially shared and secretive experiences. *Ethos* and ethics have an etymological root that link them to the notion of ethnicity (from Greek *ethnikos*) (cf. Partridge, 2006). Originally used to refer to the foreigners, heathen peoples, expressing an opposition between "us" and "the others," today ethnicity is a category to address a people that share, among other aspects, an *ethos*. In this sense, ethics as a branch of philosophy is concerned with the duties and effects of human actions in the world with others, addressing varied understandings of well-being that differ among peoples and communities.

Nowadays, intense migratory movement of people with different ethnicity amplifies the need for understanding the conditions for dialogue and for implementing desirable modes of mutual coexistence with the other, between distinct *ethos*. For

Coelho Junior (2008), Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of ethics reflects that the intersubjective relations imply dislocation, splitting, or modification of subjective experience. Ethics is, then, a permanent reflection that acknowledges the precedence of other guiding and making the self possible:

Undoubtedly, Levinas' great statement is that the relationship with the other is not an act of knowledge, it is not situated, therefore, at the epistemological level, but it is, above all, an ethical relationship that institutes subjectivity itself. The subjective experience is conceived as a permanent and inevitable opening to the other, in its alterity. (Coelho Junior, 2008, p. 220)

Ethical, ontological, and epistemological issues are, then, relevant dimensions for cultural psychology studies, and for all sciences, since the instrumental rationality defines modern sciences, in contrast to a contemplative knowledge, supposedly neutral and unimplicated of the problems that afflict our social life. These considerations touch the interests and other aspects that exceed the reason methodically employed in the formulation of scientific knowledge (cf. Gadamer, 2010a, 2010b), demanding the reflection on the mythopoetic roots and their extra scientific truths grounding all semiotic elaborations of human experiences.

## 2 Ethics, Ontology, and Epistemology in Valsiner's Cultural Psychology

The ethical reflection is a core issue where my training on cultural psychology started since my undergraduate studies, with regular attention to Valsiner's works. Explicit invitations for the ethical reflection in psychological theorization are regularly present in the framework of semiotic-cultural constructivism since Simão (2004). Possibly, the centrality of the ethical reflection is an identity trait that marks the distinction of this framework from other branches of cultural psychology. Nevertheless, the notion of ethics is almost completely absent in the works of Jaan Valsiner. Although it is not explicit in his publications, ethical concerns are present in Valsiner's openness to welcome the anxieties of young researchers who arrive at his network on cultural psychology.

An interview conducted by Günter Mey and Katja Mruck (in Valsiner, 2017a) approaches Jaan Valsiner as a person behind the theory. He talks about the goal of cultural psychology, related to the understanding of human beings as interdependent with the socio-culturally organized environments, against political/ideological State overdetermination in science construction, in favor of playing with ideas instead of authoritatively submission to any pre-set ideas. He talks about his search for an academic environment in which different belief systems have the right to coexist in parallel, about experiencing learning as a joint work with colleagues including their life/work worlds.

I understand all these concerns as ethical concerns in the adjective sense discussed in the previous topic. The impact of lived events in multiple social settings

and the partnership with researchers from all around the world configure Valsiner's theory as a semiotic elaboration from his ethical commitment as a permanent and inevitable opening to the other. Cultural psychology embraces the necessary coexistence of cultures and interests in social life, confronting authoritarian and limiting impositions to the human possibilities of being, knowing, and learning.

When Valsiner proposes the psychological systems as semiotic fields, which organize the flow of chaotic and indeterminate experiences that seeps indefinitely in the irreversibility of time, he opposes the sufficiency of schematic, point-like elaboration of ideas. The generalizing abstraction, although it is needed in the psychological science, assumes the shape of a pleromatic field, which is an open-ended system, able to house ever-wider sets of human experiences, case by case, transforming itself in this hosting process:

Psychological concepts are much more productive if treated as zones or fields, instead of point-like, discrete or clear-cut defined categories (Valsiner 2017a). In short, signs can no longer be conceived as discrete, singular points in the semiotic universe, even worse, as precisely definable categories. Even a sentence, and the enunciation approach to make sense of the meanings under interpretation shall be replaced by a larger, more complex, and expandable perspective, which considers the role of human affection and motivation during communication processes. (Valsiner, 2017a, p. 195)

The pleroma-like theories are results of the creative abductive reflection of the researcher, instead of a deductive or inductive determination. It is an elaboration on the role of the body and temporality in the cogenetic logic of the North American classic pragmatists. It stresses the need to broadening and deepening fields of dialogue between distinct perspectives to the scientific advance.

Therefore, it seems to me that Valsiner may contradict himself when, in an interview conducted by Aaro Toomela, distinguishing the role of the scientist and the role of a supposed participant of a supposed investigation, he says:

Their goal is to overcome the temper tantrum. My goal is to understand what is happening to the mother and the child. I am a passer-by, I am not involved with the mother and child, understanding from a distance, in some sense understanding for the sake of understanding, rather than for the sake of application. (Valsiner, 2017a, p. 378)

I agree that researcher and participant, artists, politicians, priests, etc. all have different interests and purposes in our shared social life; nevertheless, the sake of the researcher in psychology is (or should) never be only for the sake of understanding. Psychology plays (or should play) a significant role in our world that goes beyond the significant role of knowing, to transform knowledge in an instrument of social transformation, dealing with complex issues of local and global relevance (cf. Boesch, 2008). Actually, we have no choice, complex social issues affect us, and we are responsible for the implied or reserved answers we construct and give to them as psychologists. The works of Jaan Valsiner are plenty of dedicated discussions, on a number of central issues to contemporary society; from the criticism of the missionary colonialist education to the claiming of researchers as creators, more than consumers of psychological knowledge.

### 3 On the Relationalism of Jaan Valsiner

The rational-scientific knowledge is an episode (cf. Gadamer, 2010b) on the temporality of individual and collective multifaceted social existence: a specific mode of propitiating, configuring, shaping, and constructing people and their worlds. Psychological systems occupy a position in this temporal streaming, guiding it, that is, offering conditions to host a set of human experiences and elaborations and presenting limits to this purpose (cf. Figueiredo, 1996/2013). Cultural psychology proposes reflections about how people elaborate meanings of their lived experiences through semiotic processes. Nevertheless, taking the semiotic elaboration of others as subject matter of psychological concern does not ensure that we are able to do the same with us, at least, at the same time we do it to others. To know is not to contemplate the totality of processes constructing rational or meaningful relations between indefinite phenomena; it involves an attention focused on the development of a selected task (could be complex issues of local and global relevance), based on personal or collective interests (political, aesthetic, economical, etc.)

Valsiner (2017a) proposes ontology as constructed entities. Moreover, the world human beings construct is the same that constructs human beings. It is a bidirectional relation I-other-world, approached in the ethical reflections. The active construction of psychological theories is an answer to our inevitable opening to the other, in its alterity, to an experience that call us to act.

Valsiner's rejection of any ontology of static, solid givens partially resonates with Husserl epistemological criticism in the Vienna Lectures (cf. Husserl, 1935/1970). Trnka (2020) discusses the phenomenologist's reflection concerning on what the crisis of the European sciences consists of, addressing two tendencies on this question: "one focusing on the loss of the sciences' meaningfulness for life, the other emphasizing the inadequacy of their scientificity" (p. 1). Husserl promotes a "historical de-construction of scientific objectivism as a misleading metaphysical claim concerning the lived world" (Trnka 2020, p. 1). The naturalism, as the ontology of modern sciences, is confronted in the path Husserl identifies as the teleology of European history:

[...] The "crisis of European existence," talked about so much today and documented in innumerable symptoms of the breakdown of life, is not an obscure fate, an impenetrable destiny; rather, it becomes understandable and transparent against the background of *the teleology of European history* that can be discovered philosophically. The condition for this understanding, however, is that the phenomenon "Europe" be grasped in its central, essential nucleus. In order to be able to comprehend the disarray of the present "crisis," we had to work out the *concept of Europe as the historical teleology of the infinite goals of reason; we had to show how the European "world" was born out of ideas of reason, i.e., out of the spirit of philosophy*. The "crisis" could then become distinguishable as the *apparent failure of rationalism*. The reason for the failure of a rational culture, however, as we said, lies not in the essence of rationalism itself but solely in its being rendered superficial, in its entanglement in "naturalism" and "objectivism."

There are only two escapes from the crisis of European existence: the downfall of Europe in its estrangement from its own rational sense of life, its fall into hostility toward the spirit

and into barbarity; or the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy through a heroism of reason that overcomes naturalism once and for all. Europe's greatest danger is weariness. If we struggle against this greatest of all dangers as "good Europeans" with the sort of courage that does not fear even an infinite struggle, then out of the destructive blaze of lack of faith, the smoldering fire of despair over the West's mission for humanity, the ashes of great weariness, will rise up the phoenix of a new life-inwardness and spiritualization as the pledge of a great and distant future for man: for the spirit alone is immortal. (Husserl, 1935, p. 299, emphasis is in the original)

Valsiner would hesitate following the missionary purpose of the phenomenologist; however, his understanding of ontology as constructed entities converges with the need of disentanglement of the reason (or psychological theories) to an idea of essential and static nature and pure objectivity of psychological phenomena. A person feels, thinks, and acts constructing and using signs, and the experienced phenomena are approached as elaborated through semiotic mediation. The phenomena present themselves in the irreversible stream of temporality as something transitory and impermanent. Semiotic elaborations temporarily stabilize the stream, as a conceptual product of the abstraction activity, creating a bounded indeterminacy (cf. Valsiner, 1998). The phenomenological criticism to the natural attitude prevents us to the equivocal of apprehending the semiotic stabilization as something rigid and immutable, identifying it to the real.

The universal in cultural psychology, therefore, is neither an entity of objective nature nor the products of semiotic elaboration, but the semiotic process that underlies the production of signs. The particular is not the subjectivity or the culture, but the phenomena as they are actively constructed through signs in concrete personal trajectories, organizing meaningful aspects of life experiences. Signs are inherited and transformed in the articulations psychological systems perform constructing meaning to lived experiences. The social environment structures a set of tensions in relation to which we are impacted by others and responsible for what we do in face of the other.

Considering Valsiner's rejection of a rigid ontology, some questions emerge in the paths of his relationalism. Is cultural psychology available to dialogue, without missionary purposes, with the multinaturalist ontology of Amerindian peoples presented in the introduction of this chapter? Are we able to get distance from the kinship relations to the others and the world we collectively and individually create to live in? To understand, psychologically, human ontological diversity/dynamics, is sufficient and safe to base ourselves in a strong epistemology based on the rationality of the scientific method? Or, are we ready to include a reflection on how extra scientific truths guide our reasoning, introducing the ethical reflection to the construction of imagined futures?

The purpose of collaborating and achieving the reciprocal coexistence of multiple belief systems, as concrete possibilities of being, knowing, and learning from mutual partnership, finds many limits of realization in our contemporary societies, resulting from violent colonial processes, whose effects are persistent until today. Cultural psychology is concerned with human beings as sign creators, focusing on how and why different cultural forms sign creation happens in the society and in the

human psyche (cf. Valsiner, 2019b). As creativity is not only individual but also always socially situated, the cultivation of fields for human creativity is an imperative for the survival of cultural psychology. It has political implications, since the conditions for creativity and for the study of creativity cross the borders of the laboratory and the university. The future Valsiner imagines to the psychological creativity in knowledge construction needs to be expanded to many other branches of human social existence.

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# Jaan Valsiner, a Keen Perceiver and Creator of Cultural Ecology



Shuangshuang Xu, Aruna Wu, and Xiaowen Li

It was more than 10 years ago that we started our amazing discovery journey with Prof. Jaan Valsiner in cultural psychology. At that time, we were immersing ourselves in developmental and educational researches in Chinese formal school systems, and we were faced with doubts and challenges emerging from the popularity of quantitative studies with an adoption of questionnaires as a main method. As more and more studies relied on numbers to verify their scientific identity, we kept on asking ourselves a question, which now becomes more and more frequently proposed by our young students in psychology classes: “Can we do this?” Underlying this question are huge doubts and worries from psychology’s extremely enormous efforts to prove itself “scientific” in a capitalized society trying to measure and control everything as its resources for self-expansion. Looking back into the eyes of our young students, we have to answer these questions: How should we conduct psychological studies? Are our methods innovatively developed to probe into students’ developmental processes in the educational context reasonable? Who has the right or power to decide which is and which is not? It was at this background that we encountered Prof. Valsiner’s work. His tough and long-lasting exploration on the methodology of psychology as a developmental science has facilitated our confidence, guided, and “pushed” us to go deeper in understanding psychology’s amazing research object: the developing subject living in his/her context.

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This chapter is organized as follows: (1) psychology as a developmental science in the modern society; (2) development as active subjects embedded in a cultural ecological system; and (3) cultivating international research network as a cultural ecological system. Maybe it can be said that Prof. Valsiner is so fascinated by humankind that he devotes all his efforts to making psychology humanized: the human being as an active meaning maker with the potential to transcend his here-and-now situation. Prof. Valsiner has deeply influenced us not only by his never-stopping academic pursuit but also by his curiosity and openness to vastly different cultures and his courage and wisdom to face and transcend realistic challenges.

## 1 Psychology as a Developmental Science

Valsiner and Scheithauer (2013) distinguished two worldviews in psychological research: stable and pre-determined vs. unpredictable and always in a changing process. The first worldview regards dynamic objects in irreversible time as “entification,” as it puts language labels on phenomenological experiences and categorizes them for further processing (Valsiner, 2007, p.5). Language labels and concepts are created to temporarily represent the dynamic process, and there exists a risk of covering the complex and holistic phenomenon. Through this process, different kinds of categories are measured as stable and fixed entities and are further referred to as intra-individual characteristics to predict and control people on the level of numbers, without taking consideration of the dynamic and complex inter-relations between the developing individual and its changing environment. This illusory social control of individuals from the level of numbers as “imaginary properties” (Valsiner, 2019a, p.10) is closely related to the techno-mechanistic trend in the modernity process of our society (Xu, Wu & Li, *in press*), which also gives birth to the huge and irrational eager to massive use of quantitative methods in psychology. Numbers, as an abstract but poor representation of the real individual, are collected, processed, monitored, and retrieved for various ways of social control.

It is the second worldview of recognizing the unpredictable and ever-changing nature of the world that makes it possible to understand *complex phenomena in developmental and educational studies*. Holding on the second worldview also proposes tough tasks for cultural psychology to develop theoretical construction regarding both methods and methodologies, to grasp the human subject as an open system constantly exchanging and interacting with its social and cultural environment. This systemic openness has made human being 100% bio + 100% socio rather than 60% socio +40% bio (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p.91). For human beings, bio and socio processes are not simply additive, but rather they are in a dialectical relation as humanized nature and naturalized human. It is also from this sense that cultural psychology has the confidence to identify itself as a general psychology: it is general as it requests to firmly recognize the unique human nature of its developing subject, which constitutes a fundamental basis for psychological research in all branches. This essential understanding manifests itself best in Prof. Valsiner’s

(2020, in preparation) introduction of his newest book *General Human Psychology: Foundations for a Science*:

“This is a new form of general psychology that starts from “the top” of human phenomena—highest forms of artistic, literary, economic, societal, technological inventions, and relate systemically with the lower psychological processes of perceiving and acting (p.1).”

From our point of view, Prof. Valsiner sets the focus of his work on conceptualizing the dynamic and systemic nature of human development. He critically absorbs “old” ideas, which are almost left behind and forgotten in psychology’s rushing into the “scientific” club. From his active introduction and interpretation of dialogical self theory and social representation theory into cultural psychology (Valsiner, 2019b), we can see that he is not only curious about different inspiring ideas but also open to the development of his own theoretical work: he does not make his work into a delicate system refusing suggestions or critiques. Instead, he constructs his theoretic work also as an open system from which emerges innovation and creativity. He is modest, brave enough, and always willing to and enthusiastic about discussing even the most basic concepts with young students, e.g., what is a sign, what is development, and finally what is cultural psychology. In his own words, he is a strange traveler wandering in the forest of fascinating ideas. As a traveler in the endless forest, he does not get lost because he is very clear and firm about what he is looking for. He searches, absorbs, and re-interprets both old and new ideas from vastly various areas to construct psychology as a developmental science, and he is modest enough to admit that his trajectory is only one of the possibilities to try to understand the complex human being. As a traveler, he is always young and curious, and he warmly welcomes dear friends of both young students and international researchers to join in this amazing inquiry journey.

## 2 Developing Students as Active Subjects Embedded in a Cultural Ecological System

As Valsiner (2019a) has reminded us: “What both psychological and semiotic theories have overlooked is the developmental nature of societal and psychological phenomena (p.16).” Both the individual and its social and cultural environment are open systems, which are in constant changing and transforming processes. From the side of the developing individual, the individual selectively and creatively internalizes social guidance and actively externalizes his construction upon the environment (Valsiner, 2014). From the side of the environment, the cultural, social, and historical context also goes through changing processes. Context constitutes the precondition for individuals’ activities and is constantly changed as a result of these activities. The present trend of individualism, instrumentalism, and utilitarianism in school system reflects a bigger picture of the techno-mechanistic movement of modern society (Xu, Wu & Li, *in press*). School context, as a part of a chain in social organization, is more and more regarded as a factory producing qualified workers.

Developmental psychology set from the theoretical legacy of cultural psychology (cultural developmental psychology) is a “romantic rebel” against the times’ spirit of technology and capitalism. Although the room left for cultural developmental psychology in the modern educational system is narrow, researchers can still be constructive by transforming the school context and working on the interacting relationship between students and their social situation. The following part will use our work in school intervention, with “cultural ecosystem” as its key concept, as an example to clarify how a school context constructed as a cultural ecological system can catalyze and support students’ development and how students’ active devotion cultivates the school cultural ecosystem. Cultivating a cultural ecosystem in school context to some extent can represent efforts from Chinese culture in restraining and transcending the mechanical disadvantages of capitalism and technology in the school context.

In our school intervention research, recognizing the mutual feeding and constructing process between developing individuals and their social, historical, and cultural environment leads to two important aspects: (1) to actively guide students’ development, schools, as one of the microsystems of students’ development, can be changed and constructed deliberately to cultivate students’ developmental potential, and (2) the becoming process from “what has not yet developed” to “what has developed” needs accurate scaffolding from the school context as its platform to realize itself. Following this vein, we proposed the concept of “cultural ecosystem” to summarize our efforts in constructing a lively school context to facilitate and scaffold students’ developmental potential (Li, 2010).

The term “cultural,” with the connotation as a process of relating people and the world (Valsiner, 2014, p.58), emphasizes on students’ participation in playful and creative activities to form new ways of person-person and person-context relationship. The school cultural ecosystem, which is open in its nature, contains multiple nested and open subsystems, such as grades, classes, groups, and individuals. Students take active part in the construction of the cultural ecosystem to possibly actualize their personal self-transcendence through various forms of social interactions embedded in colorful cultural activities. Everyone is participating in a certain subsystem set in a bigger one and serves as a producer as well as a consumer of the ecosystem’s resources (Wu, Li & Zhang, 2017). As we have discussed above, the school context nowadays has been more and more reduced to a flat and mechanic space for knowledge acquisition, and students are regarded merely as knowledge receivers and score earners rather than active subjects constantly searching for meaning to understand themselves and their relationship with their social situation. In this sense, integrating cultural resources to construct a cultural life in school is not to treat culture as a toolbox for students to select, but to introduce a social and historical dimension into the school context. Transforming mechanic and steady school contexts into lively cultural ecosystems equals to transform abstract and random individuals into contextualized individuals with real possibilities and constraints rooted in his social and historical situation. School cultural ecosystem involves students into different social interactions with various objects. In this way, students are able to enrich their identity and recognize themselves as a real part of

their families, their schools, their cities, their nations, and their culture with their own histories, present situation, and dreamed future. On a micro-genetic level, social interaction in activities functions as the ground for developing student's internalization <> externalization process with his context. On one side, it is through the social other that the developing student can internalize social norms and values to regulate his own psychological processes. On the other side, students' creative externalization requires social others to verify and reflect itself, which also gives feedbacks for further internalization <> externalization processes. As Li points out:

"From the perspective of individual's developing laws, the individual student always develops himself in a certain group. Constructing interacting webs appropriate in cultivating students' developing potential between different grades is to use peer relation to help individual students to realize self-transcendence, and to provide supporting environment and social motivating resources for individual's active transcendence. Along with the change of grades, the system to which student activities belong would also change. The higher graders would produce new hierarchical organization and at the same time integrate lower grader's organization, which leads to a three-dimensional structural change. From the aspect of individual student's experience, higher graders' identity positions also go through changes along with expansion of their interacting webs and it also results in a larger degree of opening of their physical and psychological space of activities." (Li, 2010, p.222)

School cultural ecosystem treats cultural resources as its contents, and it regards various peer interactions as its activity form. Different from the normal school administrative organization, social interaction in the school context constructed as a cultural ecosystem is organized differently in three ways (Li, 2010):

1. Establishment of hierarchical organization of students' playful and cultural activities. Hierarchical organization is the basic characteristic of ecosystems. In the school context constructed as cultural ecosystem, students' activities are also organized on different levels: from small groups inside a class, classes in the same grade to different grades in the same school.
2. Emphasis on subjectivity of each hierarchy. The content and form of the cultural activities at each hierarchical level are specially designed and constructed based on students' interacting tendencies and developing characteristics of competences. Students' developmental potential is guided and facilitated to realize itself in their interaction with other students and cultural resources in the organized form and the organization also becomes into living to its fullest degree only through students' activities. It is students' subjective devotion to the activities that makes the hierarchical organization vivid and coherent.
3. Construction of the system as a dynamic whole. In the ecosystem, different subsystems at different hierarchical levels interact with each other, which makes the ecosystem a dynamic and holistic organization. In the cultural ecosystem of school, students' different developmental potential constitutes the driving force for inter-level interaction. Students' activities at different levels can function in a mutual-fertilizing relationship by being the object and background for each other's development. For example, in an inter-grade activity, students from lower and higher grades are both developing subjects and objects in their interaction

with each other. Both of their development are facilitated in the cultural interacting activities and function as a facilitator for the other’s development.

Transforming the school context under the concept of “cultural ecosystem” brings about rich phenomenon for developmental psychology research: how can school cultural ecosystem function as a powerful device in cultivating and realizing students’ developmental potential? To capture this dynamic and complex phenomenon, we propose to adopt the theoretical lens of cultural psychology of semiotic mediation with a focus on production and transformation of signs. The basic function of signs in mediating psychological experiences is illustrated by Valsiner (2019a) in Fig. 1.

Construction of signs functions to transcend the immersion in here-and-now experience by mediating, regulating the ongoing experience, and providing orientation for the future. Using school’s cultural ecosystem to conduct educational guidance and intervention especially shed lights on the social genesis of signs. The rich cultural resources and flexible forms of peer interaction in school cultural ecosystem can be organized in a way for students to experience and internalize innovative signs into their psychological mediating system. The powerful social dimension of cultural ecosystem, regarding both its content and its activity form, also makes it possible to support new signs to be generalized from the original hierarchical system. Cultural ecosystem also has special benefits in catalyzing the emergence of hyper-generalized signs by involving students at both the cognitive and affective levels in cultural activities. Hyper-generalized signs, like values and beliefs, can hardly be internalized if they are treated merely as concepts or knowledge from book to head in formal education. When an innovative sign has been introduced by teachers or emerged spontaneously as an expression of students’ developmental potential, the rich activities in school cultural ecosystem can also be delicately

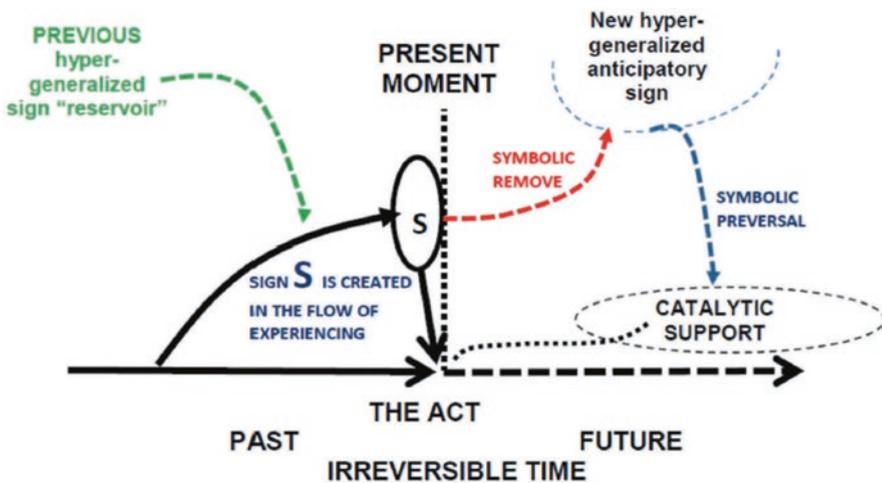


Fig. 1 The mediating function of sign in irreversible time. (Valsiner, 2019a, p.17)

designed as a platform for students to practice using the new sign to mediate themselves and their relationships with their context.

From the perspective of school's cultural ecosystem, educational guidance works from the level of school, and it supports students' subjective development by guiding students in constructing and creating cultural activities according to their developmental potentials. Students cultivate, develop, and realize their potentials by devoting to rich cultural activities, and the cultural ecosystem also becomes continuously constructed with new forms and contents through students' activities. In this way, the school system is a lively and evolving cultural ecosystem, in which school and students develop in a mutual-fertilizing relationship.

### **3 Cultivating Cultural Ecosystem in Cultural Psychology's International Research Teams**

Hierarchical organization, recognition and support of subjectivity at each level, and continuous construction and creation in social interacting activities are the essence when thinking with the idea of cultural ecosystem. We would also like to identify Prof. Valsiner's wisdom of conducting and organizing international cooperative researches in cultural psychology as constructing a cultural ecosystem in the international network. As an organizer, he is gentle and amiable, always holding the coffee pot and asking everybody "more coffee?" with a humorous smile. He supports international teams to conduct their own research on real problems in their own cultures, and he is always fascinated by the problems and regards them as interesting puzzles and challenges. He never requests or expects international researchers to be keen followers of his work. Rather, he helps researchers to cultivate and generate innovative ideas from their own work. While working with the Chinese research team, Prof. Valsiner has made his great efforts to help us analyze and recognize the unique characteristics of our local research. He conceptualized Chinese educational intervention of using the power of organized coherent groups (Jiti) to facilitate individual's development as "the most gentle intervention," and he is also so interested in the theoretical potential of the dialectical relationship between Yin and Yang in Chinese philosophy. He encourages and generously helps international researchers to be a developing subject of their own researches rooted in their own local cultural realities.

In the aspect of organization, Prof. Valsiner has helped us to establish a research team, and he has created rich opportunities for our team to participate in international communication and learning activities. Inside the team, different levels of activities have been activated: from the very start of international scholars appreciating each other's work, to Prof. Valsiner leading an international team of cultural psychologists to Shanghai, to involving master students into seminars and discussing their projects one by one, to inviting master students to attend international courses and finally to pairing students from different cultural backgrounds as

co-researchers to explore new methodologies in a local kindergarten. In our cooperation with Prof. Valsiner, our team has started a self-challenging journey in exploration of new possibilities.

## 4 Conclusion

At the end of each activity, Prof. Valsiner would always ask two questions which make us exciting and nervous at the same time: What's next? How can we be more constructive? Continuous establishment of research network as cultural ecosystems depends exactly on exploration of new organizations and new cooperations based on researchers' social practice in their own cultural background. In his never-ending work, Prof. Valsiner has shown his determination and wisdom to integrate and unite international cooperative forces to advance cultural psychology as a real developmental science with a full recognition of the unique subjectivity of each culture. As capitalism has become an unavoidable trend for the whole world, the lonely abstract individual has to look for meaning for his own existence in the capital and technological times (Jaspers, 2014), which has constituted the general background for cultural psychology research. The subject in cultural psychology is a developing individual with his historical root, continuously making meanings to live and transcend his present situation and always struggling for freedom from his historical existence. This active meaning making individual opens up different developing trajectories in different cultures. Their struggle and hope has provided vivid data for cultural psychology to study human beings in his fullest degree. Like developmental cultural psychology should recognize its responsibility in exploring pathways for educational guidance, cultural psychology, with its unique emphasis on human beings' active meaning making processes, should also cultivate itself as a powerful social science to illuminate and care about the real existence of its 100% socio and 100% bio individual. Prof. Valsiner has made great efforts in grasping this unique individual from different cultures. With his 70th birthday, we have no doubt that Prof. Valsiner would play with the number of 70 as a social guiding device in human development, and we sincerely wish that Prof. Valsiner' thinking keeps on boiling like hot strong black coffee—to excite, encourage, and share with dear friends from all over the world gathering in the bizarre landscape of psychology in the modern society.

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**Part VII**  
**Epistemological Foundations of Psychology**

# The Science of Psyche: Jaan Valsiner's Way at the Frontiers



Aaro Toomela

A *Festschrift*, as I understand it, is an interesting kind of a pre-death obituary: a relatively rare form of a scientific publication where two different subjects are discussed simultaneously. A chapter in a *Festschrift*, as any other scientific text, is usually supposed to deal with some scientifically important problem.<sup>1</sup> But, in addition, *Festschrift* is also supposed to honor a respected person; the chapters must discuss problems that are somehow related to (scientific) contributions to the scholarly field of that person. Here a contradiction may already emerge. A person may become honorable for different reasons. There are quite many *Festschriften* dedicated to highly regarded individuals with meager scientific contributions. From the writer's perspective, this is not a problem, because it is always possible to present one's own wonderful ideas under the disguise of honoring someone else.

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<sup>1</sup>I am leaving aside trends in the modern science (?), where a publication (preferably in an "important" journal) is an aim in itself. Content is less and less important; content is increasingly replaced by another attribute of a paper, the number of citations.

Sepamäe Academy of Retarded Thought was called into existence for advancing understanding of psyche. The Academy is aiming at elaborating and going beyond the most advanced level of knowledge ever achieved by the scholars. The most recent achievements of psychology remain far behind that level, the level created by mostly continental European scholars before the 1940s (cf. Toomela, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2009b, 2010a, 2012, 2014c, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020; Toomela & Valsiner, 2010). In a historically blind science, as psychology today is, the highest achievements of psychology are ignored; these are considered to be obsolete. In order to emphasize the progressive nature of the aspirations of the Academy, earlier known as *Sepamäe Academy of Advanced Thought*, it was renamed into *Sepamäe Academy of Retarded Thought* by the unanimous decision of the Board of Trustees and the staff of the Academy in 2020.

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In Jaan's case, unfortunately, the latter approach would fail. He has contributed too much, and our own writings will look, compared to what he has achieved, far too less outstanding anyway. But this creates a new problem. Why to write a text *about* his works? What he has wanted to say, he has said much better than other people could do. To discuss how his ideas have affected my own way of thinking seems also strange. Who would care to know what some unknown student or follower of a great man has learned from him?

So, there are reasons to suspect that authors of Festschriften may have other aims with their publications. One such aim was identified by another Estonian-origin psychologist, Endel Tulving. He discovered that "a Festschrift frequently enough also serves as a convenient place in which those who are invited to contribute find a permanent resting place for their otherwise unpublishable or at least difficult to publish papers" (Tulving, 2007, p. 39). "Eureka!" may some author now claim: "I found a reason to excavate in my huge mountain of unpublished papers and find something that could be finally published!"

Jaan, however, has excluded that possibility also. He is the editor-in-chief of two scientific journals, *Culture and Psychology* and *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*. In addition, he has edited many books. And in these publications, many papers that would have been, or were, rejected by other psychology journals or edited books found their "permanent resting place." This fact may suggest that Jaan has published low-quality papers. This is not correct, however. First of all, the context of the academic psychology today must be taken into account. In mainstream psychology,<sup>2</sup> with its mainstream "highly regarded journals and books," practically *only* scientifically questionable papers are published. These papers are mostly reports of empirical studies where research methods do not correspond to the questions asked. This chapter is not the place to go into details on this issue. So, I give just two facts to support this statement. First, as a rule, in mainstream psychology, individual differences are studied. The data from such studies are encoded into variables, which then are analyzed by statistical data analysis methods. The conclusions of such studies, however, are made about the mental processes of the individuals. Mathematically it is impossible to conclude anything grounded about individuals based on studies of individual differences unless very strict theoretical conditions are satisfied; these conditions cannot be satisfied in psychology (Molenaar, 2004, 2007, 2008). And second, in mainstream psychology, the study results are first encoded into variables and analyzed only after that. Again, as a rule (i.e., practically always), the studied phenomenon, mind in this case, becomes highly distorted so that no grounded conclusion can be made about it (cf. Toomela, 2008). There are many more reasons to question mainstream psychology approaches, but the mentioned two alone are already sufficient (but see, among numerous others, Toomela, 2007a, 2007b, 2010b, 2019).

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<sup>2</sup>I have defined mainstream psychology in this way: Mainstream psychology is an approach to the science of mind accepted by majority of psychologists and defined by ontological and epistemological qualities questioned by representatives of non-mainstream psychology (Toomela, 2014a, p. 1117).

Therefore, even if anything written on the study of mind would have been published in journals and books Jaan has been editing, the situation could not get worse than it is. Mainstream psychology publishes either meaningless numbers or “theories” that generalize studies that provide such numbers. No understanding of what psyche is and how it works emerges from such studies. Yet Jaan is not letting anything be published. For example, no mainstream-type papers are published in his journals and books. Further, he is the only (!) editor I have ever known (and I have known really many of them) who has rejected ...<sup>3</sup> reviews. So there are all the reasons to suggest that Jaan really is paying attention to what becomes published.

In my opinion, it would be correct to say that Jaan has accepted for publication papers and books from very different theoretical orientations and approaches (with the exception, as I wrote, the mainstream). Some of these approaches may even be mutually exclusive. But this is inevitable at the current state of psychology, where it is theoretically soundly demonstrated that the mainstream approach is flawed, whereas it has not been discovered yet which of the several promising approaches – he publishes – turn out to be substantially grounded in the long run. Publishing such papers is the only way to find out how to finally leave behind the mainstream science (?) of mind that produces “facts” with little or no meaning and build a new science, where understanding of the mind can emerge.

So, I have to arrive at a sad conclusion that this Festschrift dedicated to him cannot include papers that could not be published elsewhere. The authors of the papers in this volume, all somehow intellectually related to Jaan's way in science, could find some resting place for their papers. If not elsewhere, then in the publications he edits. Thus, I must find another reason to write a chapter into this Festschrift. After countless ... time units ... I finally found a good reason to do that. There is another aim to contribute to Festschriften I discovered. The inspiration for this discovery I found in a song, called “Klunker,” written by an Estonian World War II refugee Olaf Kopvillem (1926–1997). In this song, a neighbor's jubilee celebration party is described. So, it is very much an appropriate source for making discoveries for a Festschrift. In this birthday party, time to make speeches came, and:

Siis perekonnatuttav ootamatult tõusis üles,  
 kusjuures tema võileib leidis koha naabri süles.  
 Ta näole manas tähtsa ilme, lauale end toetas  
 ja kogemata lipsu peedisalatisse soetas.  
 Küll juubilari tegudele palju sõnu pühendas,  
*nii osavasti ennast nende tegudega ühendas.* [...]
 (my emphasis)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>I had difficulties with finding a correct word here. Fill in the blank with a politically correct term that is synonymous with “harebrained.” It would not be nice to hurt feelings of hares by using such a term.

<sup>4</sup>I know that Jaan can understand the lines of the song. If, by chance, there would be anybody else reading this chapter, it might happen that Estonian is not among the languages they know. Hence, I try with a rough translation:

Then suddenly a friend of the family stood up,  
 Whereas his sandwich found a place on the neighbor's lap,

Yes! This is what I can do! I can write a chapter to elevate myself by connecting my accomplishments (if there are any) with Jaan's. His deeds are obvious and cannot be diminished, but I can become more prominent. And there will be another chapter in the Festschrift. This is a classical win-win situation. It also adds to the long tradition of writing chapters with such aims in Festschriften, so cultural continuity is also supported.

Now my aim is set, and I can proceed to the content. One remark might be useful before I do that. Here I would like to remind the following idea of Aristotle:

The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse – you might put the work of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be a species of history; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. (Aristotle, 1984, 1451a39–1451b4, p. 2323)

This chapter is also written in “verse,” i.e., an illusion may have emerged that it is a little humorous. Yet it might be a good idea not to be carried too far away with the humorous form. There is also a content, which does not fully correspond to the form.

## 1 Jaan's Way in the Science of Mind

I suppose it must be quite obvious to anybody who has some idea of the mainstream psychology today and also Jaan's psychology that these two do not fit together. If anything, these two paths of science have led to very different places. With every new text, Jaan moves further and further away from what is considered by majority of psychologists to be the scientific way. It might be a common interpretation of such a situation that either one or the other lacks wisdom. And if millions go in one way and only dozens in the other, then likely a million must be wiser than the dozens. The history of all sciences has proven many times that the latter conclusion can be wrong. Dozens and sometimes even single individuals have been right when millions went wrong. The first conclusion – that one or the other must lack wisdom – is also not necessarily correct. Francis Bacon made the relevant observation already centuries ago:

As the saying goes, a lame man on the right road beats the runner who misses his way. It is absolutely clear that if you run the wrong way, the better and faster you are, the more you go astray. (Bacon, 2000, p. 50)

This saying applies also here: there are different ways of doing psychology, some of them are wrong, and the others might be right. Yet those running on the wrong path can be very wise; just they happened to begin running in the wrong direction. It does

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To his face an important look he gave, then on the table he leaned,  
 And accidentally his tie in the salad of beet he stored,  
 Many words to the jubilarian's deeds he dedicated,  
*So skillfully himself with these deeds he connected [...]*

not follow, however, that Jaan, being on the right way, as I am going to show below, is “lame.” He chose a much better justified way and has moved fast on it.

So far, I have made a statement. Without justification, it remains only an opinion. In science, opinion is important – but only in the beginning of exploring a new area. The further science goes in studying whatever is studied, the less there must be place for an opinion and the more there must be justified understanding. In science, choosing a way, i.e., an ontological and epistemological ground for constructing knowledge, is based on general principles and not on local decisions that are related to specific questions to be answered. Next I will discuss some of the most fundamental principles Jaan is following in his psychology to demonstrate that his way in science is grounded in solid principles – the same principles that are ignored in mainstream psychology today.

### ***Roots in the History***

Obviously, it is easy to get lost when the past and the origins are forgotten. Running from “I forgot from where” can end up in arriving at the beginning instead of the planned destination, especially if it is also forgotten how a runner – a science – has arrived to where it is at the moment. There are two ways how history of a science can be known. One of them, paradoxically, does not require thorough knowledge of the past. It is possible in cumulative, hierarchically developing sciences where every next idea or every next theory emerges on the basis of the existing theories and ideas. In such sciences, understanding the highest level achieved requires understanding the earlier theories in which the most recent theories are rooted. Thus, understanding a theory already includes understanding the history of the ideas, even when there is no date or name of a famous scholar mentioned.

Physics and biology today are largely cumulative sciences. But psychology is not. Hence, psychology should know its history very well in order not to repeat mistakes of the past and build its direction. Clearly psychology is not only repeating itself. It is true that new facts are added to the knowledge base of psychology every day. But the result is not an increase in understanding because these facts increase the variety but not the complexity of theories. Here, knowledge of earlier theories is not needed for new discoveries. I am not suggesting that no connection to the past exists. It does exist, but is short, covering perhaps last 10–15 years. And it is also very limited, restricted to a few hundred empirical study results at the very best. I think the strongest support to historical blindness of mainstream psychology is reflected in rediscoveries of known before facts and principles. I am not aware of any major discovery made during last half of a century that would have not been known before (e.g., Toomela, 2010a, 2016a; Toomela & Valsiner, 2010). Obviously, I am not in a position to declare that no novel major discoveries emerged recently; there is no way to know all that is published. Hence, there can be some theories I am not aware of that truly have advanced psychology. Nevertheless, there are too many “novel major discoveries” that actually turn out to be small rediscoveries to consider

psychology as a cumulative enterprise. The situation has become almost ridiculous in the last decade where rediscoveries of the last half of the century are rediscovered again with one addition: now it is “discovered” that these rediscovered psychological facts emerge in the processes of the brain.<sup>5</sup> Altogether, mainstream psychology is historically blind.

Superficially it may seem that psychology today is well informed about the accomplishments of the past. Indeed, in major mainstream psychology textbooks and theoretical volumes, important figures of the psychology’s past are mentioned. Sometimes even some of the ideas of those long-dead scholars are described. Presence of historical facts, however, does not exclude being historically blind in a sense I am discussing here. It is important to take into account why history is described at all. I have found overall six different reasons to describe or discuss history in scientific works (Toomela, 2016a). Three of these reasons can be found in mainstream accounts – and none of these three removes historical blindness. One reason is to demonstrate the reader that the author of the text is educated and knows even what Aristotle has written. Another reason is to demonstrate that the author represents a country or a nation from where all the important knowledge in the field originates. And finally, sometimes historical facts are used to create an illusion of the deep historical roots of the proposed theory or idea. These three reasons practically exhaust all causes why history is described in the mainstream psychology.

But there are also three reasons that can ground further development of a science. The first reason requires the study of the history of the commonly accepted ideas. When novel ideas are proposed, then they can be accepted only on the basis of explicitly given justification as to why this idea is worthy to keep. In time, however, the accepted idea is retained, but the justification is forgotten. Going back to the origins of the idea may reveal that the justification does not correspond any more to the standards of the present and, therefore, the idea must be revised or even rejected. Second, in a noncumulative science, many discoveries can be made by studying history. I remember Jaan telling me long time ago that psychology would win a lot if all scholars would just study history a few years instead of continuing producing the new “data.” I think there is sufficient evidence to suggest that psychology of the past is still far ahead of the psychology today (e.g., Toomela, 2007a, 2009b, 2012, 2014b, 2014e, 2017, 2019, 2020). There is also a third constructive reason to study history of ideas. Sometimes it is possible, through studying historical context of a theory, to understand this theory better than before.

And how is all of this related to Jaan’s way in psychology? Very directly: he is not historically blind in his science. He not only knows the history of psychology but also builds his own most recent ideas on these roots (Jaan has written so many

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<sup>5</sup>Actually there has been made a major discovery in cognitive neurosciences that really advances our knowledge. There is more and more evidence about how “our brain” operates. I have my own brain, only mine. So I thought, obviously erroneously, that the same applies to every other individual with a brain. Now, it seems, some individuals have one shared brain for many. And they learn more and more about how “their brain” (I do not share my brain, so not “our”) works. If you do not know about this discovery, just Google “our brain.”

texts and edited books about history and/or grounded in history that the list alone would make a length of a good chapter; so I give just a few examples: Valsiner, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2012, 2014; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). Reading these and other of Jaan's works provides an understanding of why he has rejected mainstream psychology as unfruitful: this rejection is based on historical analysis and discovery of the strength of the historical approaches unparalleled in the mainstream psychology today. So Jaan's approach is based on solid historical ground; he knows the roots of his ideas. This, in turn, grounds a direction where to proceed with a science. He is not just repeating what is known in the history; he is constantly building theories that aim at going beyond what was achieved by founders of our science.

### *Eyes on the Whole World*

Among the three nonproductive ways to discuss history of a science is one that is used to demonstrate that the author represents a country or a nation from where all important knowledge in the field originates. The same tendency is reflected in what can be called a geographical blindness: scholars ignore scientific achievements, both past and present, on the geographical basis. Such blindness was more prominent before, when scientific publishing was less international. But it is still here today. Geographical selectivity appears in the editor's decisions to accept scientific papers for publication, in citation rates, in rating the content of studies, and in cooperative international research practices (Akre et al., 2009; Gonzales-Alcaide et al., 2017; Harris et al., 2015; Pasterkamp et al., 2007; Skopec et al., 2020; Yousefi-Nooraie et al., 2006; Zanutto et al., 2016).

Geographical blindness limits development of scientific knowledge further. Outstanding scientific achievements can be grounded almost anywhere in the world, and geographical bias hinders accumulation of scientific understanding. Geographical bias may also affect science in the other way: if local theories turn out to be nonproductive, then promotion of them for geographical reasons may halt the development of a science in that country or geographically restricted community. The best recent examples of geographical blindness in the history of psychology can be found in North America, where behaviorism practically stopped all scientific achievement for more than a century,<sup>6</sup> and in Russia/Soviet Union, where the same happened due to promoting a significantly distorted version of Pavlov's theory.

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<sup>6</sup>So-called cognitive revolution in the 1950s is usually associated with rejecting behaviorism. It is correct only superficially. Psychology that is rooted in this "revolution" has not rejected the main flaw of behaviorism: it is still assumed that psyche can be directly characterized by observing behaviors. If behaviors look similar, it is assumed that mental processes underlying them are also similar. And vice versa, if behaviors look different, it is assumed the underlying psychic processes of the behaviors must be also different. These assumptions are simply wrong. Externally identical behaviors can be based on different psychic processes and vice versa. So essentially psychology

Jaan, it can be easily seen, is also not blind geographically. He publishes, as an editor, papers from authors all over the world (among them are even Estonians). His theories are also grounded in scholarly works from all over the world. I think it is not necessary to analyze this aspect of his theories in detail. But it must become obvious to anybody reading his ideas that knowing what happens in the world (of science) makes his approach much deeper and complex when compared to geographically (and historically) blind approaches (i.e., the whole mainstream psychology and large part of so-called qualitative psychology on top of it).

### *Epistemology and Methodology*

All sciences are based on epistemologies, specific understandings of knowledge and its accomplishment. The existence of epistemology in sciences is reflected in the fact that no science would accept all kinds of statements about the world as scientific knowledge. Scientific statements must have a certain structure, a certain kind of content. For instance, in mainstream psychology today, the aim of studies is declared to be the discovery of causes of whatever is studied. So, it may seem that mainstream psychology is epistemologically well grounded. However, the opposite is true. The problem is that the prevalent contemporary epistemology that defines scientific knowledge as a description of linear cause-effect causal relations is just one of the several epistemologies that can be found in psychology in particular or in science in general. If there is more than one way to understand what scientific explanation is, then there should be explicit and sound justification for why one epistemological position is chosen and why others are rejected.

Mainstream psychology fails on both counts. On the one hand, the justification of only searching for cause-effect relations has been justified in only two ways (at least I have not discovered any other). Science can search for only cause-effect relations either because there is omnipotent and omnipresent God or because humans are not able in principle to know more than that (see Toomela, 2012, 2019). I do not think that either of these justifications – both grounded in seventeenth- to eighteenth-century philosophy – is acceptable today. But nevertheless the epistemology grounded on these principles is accepted in mainstream psychology just by implicitly assuming that it is the best among the alternatives.

On the other hand, mainstream psychology has also not provided any reason as to why to reject other epistemologies found in psychology today, either the one(s) underlying modern qualitative research or another I have called structural-systemic (cf. Toomela, 2012, 2014d, 2016b, 2019). Searching for only cause-effect relationships would not be a problem if the structural-systemic epistemology would not be more complex and comprehensive. But it is. And yet, there is no study of

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did not get rid of behaviorism with cognitive revolution; terminology changed but basic epistemology and methodology remained the same.

epistemology in mainstream psychology. As there is at least one epistemology better justified than that accepted unequivocally by the mainstream psychology, it can be concluded that mainstream psychology is incomplete and not sufficiently grounded.

Still mainstream psychology at least has an epistemology. But another fundamental area of knowledge, absolutely necessary for any science, is missing in mainstream psychology altogether. There is no methodology. Methodology is not a list of research methods – there are numerous books in psychology that provide such lists of methods, recipes, if you like. Numerous new methods are also constantly created and added to the lists. Methodology is not methods; it is a study of the relevance of the methods – methodology is aimed at justifying why and how the chosen methods allow the answering of questions asked in a scientific practice. Here mainstream psychology has failed totally. The methods of study rely, with practically no exception, on quantification of the “data” constructed<sup>7</sup> in studies, followed by interpretation of the data with the help of statistical or other mathematical procedures. I have not found a single argument to support the idea that such data interpretation methods can ground the increasing understanding of or a scientific explanation of the psyche. Even causal linear cause-effect relations can be only attributed but not proven with such methods. Yet there are many reasons to suggest that the questions asked cannot be answered with such methods in principle (e.g., Toomela, 2008, 2009a, 2010b, 2011, 2014b).

So, epistemology and methodology are a must for any science to be more than just a game. Mainstream psychology today turned into a game a long time ago. Jaan's way in science, however, has both epistemological ground and methodology. He has both written extensively on these subjects and edited several books on epistemology and methodology of psychology (e.g., Cabell & Valsiner, 2014; Valsiner, 1986, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2019a; Valsiner et al., 2009, 2016; Valsiner & Brinkmann, 2016; Valsiner & Sato, 2006; Van der Veer, van IJzendoor, & Valsiner, 1994). Furthermore, these issues are not some recent discoveries for him. As it can be seen from the list of references I just provided, he has been dealing with these issues for more than 30 years. Hence, both epistemology and methodology have defined his way in science all along.

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<sup>7</sup>Data are not objective; they are constructed by a researcher. This construction begins with the design of the study procedures. If, for example, it is decided that a questionnaire with a Likert-type answering format will be used in the study, then it is already determined what become “data”: the numbers selected by participants of the study. The study procedures are always constructed by researchers in all sciences. Even pure observations are constructed by a researcher's decisions about what, when, and in which circumstances will be observed and how the observations will be transformed into data.

## *Jaan's Theories*

Now I arrive at Jaan's theories; it is already the area where Jaan has presented his ideas far better than I could do. Therefore, I do not see a good reason to start discussing them in details. But I would like to stress one general point that puts his theories ahead of practically every theory that can be found in mainstream psychology today (most of them provide just names for inductive generalizations; list of names can hardly be called a theory anyway).

So, what makes Jaan's theories more advanced than the others today and at the same level of the truly advanced mostly continental European psychological theories of the late nineteenth to the first half of the twentieth century? It is noteworthy that he arrives at the high level of generalization. This, of course, is not anything unusual. Quite many abstract theories can be found today. On the other hand, he builds his theories on the basis of particular manifestations of the complex psychological processes of the *individuals*. This is not uncommon also: many such theories can be found in so-called qualitative psychology today.

What is unusual, and outstanding on the background of the psychologies today, is that his theories are very general and very particular *at the same time*. Mainstream psychology loses individuals with their real-life experiences already with the selection of research methods; so if generalized theories are proposed, then it is not clear about what they really are. Because such generalized theories cannot be about individuals – the only level of analysis where the studied phenomenon, the psyche, exists. Most of the modern qualitative approaches are clearly tied to the individual level of analysis. But these, as a rule, do not arrive at the generalized theories of the human mind as such.

Here is one example out of very many. In his recent book, *Ornamented Lives* (Valsiner, 2019b), Jaan studies the role and place of ornaments in our lives. On page 178 of that book, we find an abstract-general figure describing constructive processes of internalization and externalization. On the next pages, this theory is used to understand better what an individual can experience, for instance, when entering Louis XV's bedroom in Versailles (a photo of the room is also provided). So there is a high-level generalization connected to a particular: how a person can experience a specific highly ornamented room or how a person experiences different other particulars of the world. Such theories, psychology should strive to create, are rare today. There is no point to arrive at generalizations, if these generalizations lose the connection with each and every individual about whom it is supposed to be. And there is also no point to "discover" that individuals are individuals; they are in certain aspects different from everybody else without arriving at a well-grounded (!) generalization.

## *Is There Anything Missing in Jaan's Theories?*

Everything I have written so far shows that Jaan's way in science – if to accept the justifications I provided – is well grounded. He has been on that way already for many years. If his way was well chosen, there should be good theories created on the way. I think there are. But it does not follow that the theories should be “ready” by now. Paradoxically, if a scientific theory becomes “ready” so that it does not lead to novel questions, then that theory very likely is also not very valuable. If we just think about a “small” theory of what is the structure of a gene, the theory that was created more than half a century ago. Everything seems to be clear and solved with this theory. In a way it is. But on the basis of this theory, entirely new kinds of questions do not cease to emerge. The same applies even more to general theories, such as Darwin's theory of evolution or Vygotsky's theory of the human mind. Creative potential of such theories is enormous.

So, not surprisingly, Jaan's theories call for novel questions also. These could be asked at different levels of analysis. In this chapter, I have focused on the general principles of science. So I propose two general questions that emerge from his theories. First, are there intermediate layers between the very general theoretical principles and particulars of the psychological processes of individuals that are explained by the theories? Sometimes it seems to be so. For instance, in his theory of internalization, this process is assumed to be constructive. Indeed, I do not see also how it could be otherwise. Messages that become internalized are transformed in this process, often into qualitatively different messages altogether. So there seems to be no reason to doubt in this theoretical principle Jaan incorporated into his theory of internalization-externalization. But what it is, from what the internalized message is composed of and how this constructive process evolves over time, needs perhaps elaboration beyond the level Jaan has formulated. Similar questions can be asked about several other theoretical constructs Jaan has proposed.

The second question emerges from a general idea formulated by Vygotsky. He proposed that all specifically human higher psychological processes are composed from what he called “natural,” i.e., inborn processes (e.g., Vygotsky, 1994). In order to understand (human) psyche, it is also necessary to understand how psyche emerges from purely biotic processes. Very likely such a theory of emergence would constrain theories of the functioning of the psyche. So it would be interesting to discover how human mind became into being and developed into forms described by Jaan's theories.

## **2 Conclusions**

With this chapter, I tried to dedicate many words and ideas to the jubilarian's deeds in science. I hope I succeeded in achieving all the aims I had. First, and foremost, I began with the proposition that Jaan's way in science has been outstanding and far

ahead of mainstream psychology today. I brought four reasons to justify my proposition. First and second, Jaan is not historically and/or geographically blind. His theories rest on solid foundation of psychological theories created during almost two centuries by scholars from very different countries. Not surprisingly, he has rejected mainstream approaches to psychology on that ground. Third, he has developed not only particular theories about psyche and culture but also knowledge about the most basic issues for any science, epistemology, and methodology. So his theories are well grounded both epistemologically and methodologically. The same cannot be said about most of the psychology created by mainstream and not-so-mainstream psychologists during his whole lifetime. Finally, his theories about psyche are also outstanding in their content: he unites into a whole view high level of generalization on the one hand and particulars of human individual's life and psyche on the other. Psyche is an individual phenomenon, and science aims at generalization. Thus, psychology can make sense only if these two aspects are united in theories. Such theories, psychology should strive to create, are rare today, who have developed such theories. So, there are sound reasons to conclude that Jaan's way in science is far better grounded than that of the many others. On this way, he has created theories. And none of them seems to be "ready." This is expected, as the most important theories in any science are those that became almost never-ending sources of novel questions. The same can be said about Jaan's theories. His theories are alive and full of creative potential.

Altogether, I am happy I was invited to write a chapter into Jaan's Festschrift. Furthermore, I would like to participate in a similar project again – I am looking forward to write chapters into the next Festschriften, celebrating Jaan's 80th, 90th, and 100th anniversaries. Sometime after that, I am afraid, it might be time for him to write my obituary. But I am also certain that by that time there will be many more people who will be more than happy to continue with the Festschriften.

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# Ideas and Challenges for Cultural Psychology



Sergio Salvatore

What makes Jaan Valsiner's contribution to psychology science unique is his view of the psyche as an ongoing, semiotic dynamics of self-constitution through time to model by means of a theory-driven approach. In what follows, I will outline five key ideas which are at the grounds of this view. These ideas neither exhaust Valsiner's work or are representative of his remarkable influence on contemporary cultural psychology. Rather, I focus on them because they are at the core of my scientific and human dialogue with him, in relation of which a relevant part of my scientific work has been developing for the last two decades. They are representative of *my* Jaan Valsiner.

First key idea I want to highlight is *abstraction*. I start from it because should I be asked to identify one word to describe the essence of Valsiner's work, my choice would fall on it. Abstraction is twofold relevant. On the one hand, it denotes a basic characteristic of the semiotic dynamics. Indeed, sensemaking is the ongoing process of abstraction from the immediateness of the experience, carried out through the mediation of signs of different levels of generalization, linked recursively with each other (e.g., Valsiner, 2014). On the other hand, abstraction qualifies the approach to the study of psychological phenomena—a general method of knowledge construction which moves the focus from the empirical content of the psychological phenomena as they are given to the experience, to the conceptual models which organize and make sense to such content. Terms such as “field sign,” “transitive hierarchy,” and “boundary” are not proposed by Valsiner as if they were ontological entities, concrete things; rather, they are conceived as conceptual tools by means of which to build psychological theory. Thus, the abstraction stands at the opposite of the

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355

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tendency to reify psychological constructs that characterized current “evidence-based” mainstream psychology.

This ontological projection that is present in most of psychology is one of the “snares” of the discipline that William James pointed out in 1890 (...)—we give a label to some complex psychological phenomenon, by the label the phenomenon takes on the form of ontological entity, and that entity is further projected into the intra-psychological domain as a causal entity that is supposed to produce the particular conduct. So—it is ordinary in common language and in psychology to make claims such as “my self-esteem causes my security in family” or “my need for security causes me to search for better employment.” (Valsiner, 2020, p. 71)

In that, one can see a somehow ironic paradox. Contemporary psychology is launched in a blind run to sacralize data in order to legitimize itself as scientific; but in doing so, it distances itself from the sciences taken as model—indeed, physics, chemists, astronomy, but economics and linguistics as well—having abstract concepts at their core, thanks to which they are able to make data meaningful.

*Emergence* is the second key idea. It concerns core aspects of the semiotic view of psychological processes. At the micro-genetic level of analysis, it refers to the semiotic psychocultural view of the meaning as the ongoing emergent product of the sensemaking dynamics. This view is based on the Peircean triadic theory of the sign that enables the recognition that meaning, rather than being held in the sign, consists of the interpretation of the sign, carried out by following sign and mobilized by the interpreter. Once recognized that meaning emerges from the interpretation, the inherent dialogicality and temporality of the meaning, and therefore of the mind, come to the fore. Indeed, to say that the meaning emerges from the following sign is the same as saying that the interpreter that mobilizes such a sign is constitutive of the meaning. Namely, the sensemaking is inherently dialogical because it requires the function of otherness (the interpreter) to be accomplished, and this is so even when this function is carried out by the same sensemaker in terms of inner dialogue. Moreover, it means that the meaning and the mind are inherently temporal, consisting of an ongoing, recursive dynamics of emergence, whose instant product defines the conditions of the following unfolding of the dynamics itself. In Valsiner’s terms, psychology concerns the becoming rather than the being, and this is so because the being of the psychological reality is the becoming.

*Dynamic holism* is the third key idea, which refers to the view that psychological processes are inherently systemic, namely, that they work as wholes endowed with an inherent global organization; moreover, this organization grounds the relation of the states of the process both within the present moment and over time. The attribute “dynamic” refers to such a temporal dimension. Dynamic holism provides a view of psychological process radically different from current mainstream psychology. Here, I limit to mention four main implications of it. First, it grounds the way to bring back the dialectic logic within psychology, namely, the view of processes as patterns of relations from which new forms emerge, as contingent solutions to the inherent pars pro toto tension which is constitutive of the systemic organization. Second, it leads to the recognition of the narrowness of the efficient causality as the paradigmatic syntax of the psychological knowledge and instead adopting formal

causality, i.e., the modelling of the inherent organization underpinning the whole dynamics, as the mode and the purpose of psychological science (Heft, 2013). Third, it goes in the opposite direction with respect to the hyper-specialism of current scientific psychology and its tendency to focus on more and more parceled objects, each of which is assumed as the task of more and more specialized subdiscipline to investigate. Finally, it highlights the need of adopting methods and techniques of analysis that are consistent with the field nature of psychological processes, e.g., dynamic system theory, synergetic, and pattern recognition (Valsiner et al., 2009).

The fourth key idea is *affective semiosis*—the view of affects as the embodied forms of basic interpretation of the experience, working as the grounds of the sensemaking. This idea is the bridge between the semiotic cultural psychology and the psychoanalytic theory of mind—a bridge whose development I devoted a significant part of my work (Salvatore, 2006, 2015, 2016, 2018, 2019; Salvatore & Freda, 2011; Salvatore & Venuleo, 2008, 2010; Salvatore & Zittoun, 2011). It holds that affects are patterns of body-generalized activation, e.g., pleasantness-unpleasantness and activation-deactivation, which work as embodied meanings through which the subject provides the global interpretation of the experience, which, in its turn, channels the following paths of sensemaking whereby specific events and objects acquire meaning. According to this view, affects are hyper-generalized field signs (Valsiner, 2007)—signs concerning the whole field of the experience in terms of which the encounter between the subject and the world unfolds.

I have suggested (...) that most of our generalizing affective functions are organized by field-like signs that give flavor to the settings of everyday life. In common sense terms, these amount to the notion of psychological atmospheres. Our sensual relating with the world creates continuity across settings. That is encoded in field-like signs and allows for not only generalization but also hyper-generalization—generalizing affectively beyond generalized meanings. (Valsiner, 2020; p. vi)

I claim that human beings are constantly in the process of affective transcending of their mundane lives and—simultaneously—finding such self-constructed acts of invention affectively overwhelming (...). The basis for such feeling of being immersed in the affective relation with the world is at the lowest level of the operation of the human psyche—that of elementary sensations. These sensations—minimal units of detecting differences in our experience (“just noticeable differences” as these were labeled in early experimental psychology of 1880s)—are affective in their nature. (...)

[T]he crucial feature of the affective processes is the generalized encoding of the immediate feeling for some future—by necessity unspecifiable—time. This encoding is possible by signs—field-like signs (Valsiner 2007, 2014)—that organize whole domains within the psyche. A person is not only dealing with the momentary penetration of the skin when a technician is trying to put the needle into the vein to draw blood for analysis but assembles a generalized feeling of apprehension towards such skin penetrations in the future. The whole domain of “something might cut into my skin” becomes flavored through such anticipatory generalization from a single encounter with an aversive penetration act. (...). In this we find the unbearable simplicity of human living—some specific unique affective encounters lead to generalized apprehensions for the future, while most others become neutralized after the particular encounter ends. (Valsiner, 2020; p. 3)

The reference to the psychoanalytic theory integrates this view with the recognition of two relevant characteristics of affective semiosis (Salvatore & Freda, 2011). First, the inherent relational intentionality of affective meanings: affects do not provide a description of the field of experience; rather, due to their embodied and global nature, they interpret the environment as it were an animated subject, endowed with a relational intentionality directed toward the subjects. Thus, for instance, when a sensemaker is in an affective state of unpleasantness, she/he is not just describing a state of facts; she/he is experiencing the world as a foe engaged with providing such a condition to her/him. A clear elaboration of this idea can be found in the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1967), when she held that for the infant, the absence of the mother is experienced as the presence of the bad mother, namely, the infant's unpleasant affective state mapping the environmental condition of the mother's absence as an experienced bad, hostile entity. Second, the affective semiosis is always active. It works as a kind of barometer, monitoring the ongoing state of the subject-environment relationship (Barrett Feldman & Lindquist, 2008). This is so because affects have a bipolar semiotic structure. Indeed, given that each affect is a state of activation encompassing the whole body, it has a dichotomous, present vs. absent form, and this is the same to say that each affect has to be modeled as a juxtaposition between a given activation state and its opposite, e.g., pleasantness vs. unpleasantness, active vs. passive, alive vs. not alive, engagement vs. protection, and powerfulness vs. impotency (Osgood et al., 1975; see also Venuleo et al., 2020). The bipolar structure of affective meanings has a relevant implication. The sensemaker is always in the condition of shaping an affective interpretation of the field of experience because whatever the field is, it cannot but be associated with either a given affective pattern or its opposite. Thus, the bipolar structure of affects is the reason that makes affective semiosis the grounds of sensemaking, the basic form of interpretation that works whatever the state of the subject-world relation is. Moreover, one can understand why the salience of affective semiosis in individual and social sensemaking increases in conditions of uncertainty (e.g., Greenberg & Arndt, 2012). Indeed, the more the uncertainty, the less the capacity of more developed signs to make sense of the experience, hence the need to commit to affective meanings, which are always able to provide—though simplified and homogenizing—meaningful interpretations of the experience (Salvatore, Mannarini, et al., 2019).

The fourth idea is *abduction*. Needless to say, this idea is all but new; what is specific is the use of it to overcome the ideological nomothetic-idiographic juxtaposition plaguing psychology. Psychological phenomena are inherently contingent, namely, they are *events* happening within irreversible and ever-changing time and by the terms of the network of relations they are part of. This means that any psychological phenomenon is inherently unique because events develop through time, being always something different from what they were in the past (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2009, 2010). However, the recognition of the contingency of psychological phenomena does not imply that psychology has to give up with pursuing general knowledge. Whereas the literature, the arts, and even the technology concern with the contingent, the mission of any science is to produce generalized knowledge: the understanding of the basic, universal dynamics the contingent emerges from.

Mainstream psychology pursues generalization by terms of induction. As Peirce (1897/1932) defined it, induction is the “formation of a habit”: the redundance identified in the set of observations is assumed to work for any further potential observation that could allegedly be part of the set; therefore, the redundance is universalized as a property of the set. For instance, given that the children with high IQ are observed to have success at school (redundance of observations), then high IQ leads to success at school (universal law). As one can see, the inductive generalization is based on the assumption that observations are equivalent with each other; indeed, only based on this condition can observation be considered instances of the same set, and therefore they can be compared with each other, and information extracted by them universalized. Thus, induction enables psychological science to generalize but at the cost of bracketing the contingency of psychological phenomena—what makes psychological science distinctive. In so doing, the mainstream psychology is the best ally of the opposite movement that, in the name of the fidelity to the uniqueness of psychological phenomena, refuses generalization and practices a vision of psychological science as an endless repertoire of local understandings, intended as an end in themselves - for a recent representative instance of this debate, see the recent discussion hosted by Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science, triggered by Zagaria and colleagues’ target article concerning the scientific status of psychology (Zagaria et al., 2020). Abduction provides a solution to this seemingly unescapable dilemma. Indeed, abduction enables a form of generalization based on, rather than negating, the contingency of psychological phenomena. As Peirce defines it, abduction is the conjectural reconstruction of a condition (i.e., a cause, a previous event) which, insofar as it happened, would make the current “surprising” (i.e., contingent) event a “matters of fact” (Peirce, 1902/1932). For instance, the noise one heard from the sky (the surprising event) becomes a matter of fact insofar as one assumes it to be the result of the collision between two clouds. Thus, abduction moves from data, i.e., the surprising event, to build a local understanding of them, i.e., to identify the condition that makes them a matter of fact. Therefore, the abductive knowledge is a form of local understanding of the contingency. It is a way of making sense of the “surprising” event. However, from a complementary standpoint, the local understanding of the event requires a conceptual framework to be built. Indeed, only on the grounds of an abstract and general system of knowledge can abductive conjecture be performed. Hence, it is the framework provided by the general knowledge enabling the selection of relevant data and the identification of meaningful relations among them which the conjecture is based on. This dependency of abduction on an abstract system of knowledge is what leads to see abduction as a mode of pursuing general knowledge: abductive generalization is not a matter of accumulation of observations (as inductive generalization is); rather, it is the recursive accommodation of the general theory in order to enable it to work as the frame of the local understanding of the contingent event (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010). In other words, it is the recursive process of local abductive modelling, each of which aimed at understanding a contingent event, that, by challenging the general knowledge, enables the building and the development of the latter. In brief, in the case of abductive generalization, what is generalized is not the local data, but the capacity of the general theory to frame the local understanding of such data.

## 1 To Conclude (or Better, to Con-Open)

Thanks to the semiotic view developed by Valsiner, the cultural psychology has advanced over the last quarter of century. Yet much work is still to be done. The semiotic view of the mind has the ambition of being a general framework for psychological science, thereby rethinking psychological phenomena through recognizing the centrality meaning plays in them, as well as their inherent developmental and dialectic nature. To make cultural psychology the science of sensemaking is not tantamount to identifying yet another disciplinary sector as if the semiotic processes *were one* object of investigation among others. The “culturalness” of the cultural psychology is not a piece of the world to investigate; rather, it is a theoretical and methodological way of modelling any psychological phenomenon—a way grounded on the basic idea that the mind continuously and dynamically makes sense of experience.

In this perspective, I see three major challenges the ambitious project of semiotic cultural psychology is called to address. First, the formalization of the theory. Formalization is needed because of the abstractness which has to characterize the cultural psychology as general theory. Semiotic cultural psychology can work as general framework only if it is organized as a clear network of tenets and axioms, constraining and channeling the abductive modelling of local phenomena. Indeed, only in this way can the theory be challenged by the demand of understanding coming from the practices of local modelling and therefore developed through a dialectic, avoiding the risk of being grasped by the commonsensical view of psychological phenomena (Salvatore, 2017, 2020). Second, we need to integrate and bridge the functional/phenomenological levels of analysis, i.e., the level where the subjective experience is represented in its content, with the computational level, i.e., the modelling of the basic mechanisms underlying the phenomenological experience. Cultural psychology has claimed the need of putting meaning and the subject at the core of psychological science again, highlighting that the human experience cannot be derived only from the detection of the basic cognitive and neurobiological mechanisms (Valsiner et al., 2016). Yet this does not imply giving up the effort of building computational models of such mechanisms. Rather, it means finalizing the computational modelling for the global purpose of understanding how subjective life emerges from them (Salvatore, 2016). Third, we are dealing with radical historical turmoil. Climate change; religious, ideological, and political polarization; international conflicts; and increasing growth of socioeconomic inequalities are examples of the overarching challenges to our future that any person of good will, and therefore cultural psychologists among them, are called to address. In last years, relevant advances have been done in the direction of using the cultural psychology to understand the sociocultural dynamics underpinning these global issues (Mannarini, Veltri, & Salvatore, 2020; Salvatore, Fini, et al., 2019; Salvatore, Gennaro & Valsiner, 2014; Sammut et al., 2017; Schlieve et al., 2018; Wagoner et al., 2018). The next step is to move from the understanding to the changing of what it is we have understood, from the analysis to the design of consequent solutions (Salvatore

& Valsiner, 2014). This is not only and merely an ethical responsibility; it is first of all a big scientific chance: besides being a relevant conceptual accomplishment in itself, the building of a general theory of sociocultural change represents a powerful leave for advancing cultural psychology as a whole. Indeed, the best way to understand a dynamic is by trying to change it.

I love to think of Jaan Valsiner spending the next 50 years providing the community of cultural psychologists with the innovative ideas and vision he is able to elaborate and we need for being at the height of the ambition of our scientific enterprise.

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# Action-Theoretical Cultural Psychology and the Decentred Subject



Jürgen Straub

## 1 Brief Reminder, First Outlook

Among the most ambitious, well-developed approaches in cultural psychology are action-theoretical conceptions and research programs. Ernst Boesch's (e.g., 1991, 2021) or Jerome Bruner's (1990, 2002) works owe equally to a development in the course of which the authors moved from action-theoretical thinking to an interpretive cultural psychology (cf. Marsico, 2015; Straub et al., 2020). Boesch was already lecturing on action theory in the 1950s. Bruner took a closer look at the acts of meaning that increasingly interested him soon after the only half-hearted "cognitive turn" of the 1960s. Henceforth, he moved them to the centre of his psychology. Thus, action-theoretical thinking gradually led both authors to a decidedly cultural-psychological conception. This was – as alternative fates of action theory in psychology show – by no means necessary or inevitable. But it was obvious and consistent. Whoever says "action" must say "culture" – vice versa. These basic theoretical concepts are interdependent and inter-definable. They can only be adequately defined and explained in the light of each other.

From the very beginning, a decisive argument for the happy marriage between action theory and cultural psychology that continues to this day has been that the countless and constantly changing meanings that people associate with their material, social, and subjective world are, of course, by no means owed solely to their individual thoughts and actions. Even if individuals may associate subjective meaning with their actions and everything they encounter in the world – as Max Weber already formulated (Miebach, 2013; Bonß et al., 2020; Straub, 1999a: 63–75) – and in this way they always also live as unique selves in their personal world,

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363

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meaningful realities never emerge solely as creations of distinctive and creative individuals. People always see themselves and their world with eyes that they have learned to use within the framework of a changing, historical, social and cultural practice. We all perceive precisely that which we have been taught to see and look at in living together with others. This is true not only for seeing and sensory perception in general but for all complex psychic functions, i.e., also for thinking, feeling, wishing, willing and – of course – for acting: Psyche is socioculturally mediated.

Jaana Valsiner's cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics shares this basic view, even if it models the emergence of meanings in and between persons in a different way than action-theoretical, interpretative or hermeneutic approaches (cf. Valsiner, 2007, 2014, 2017). Nevertheless, the similarities are considerable and include the important position of the concept of action: the so-called higher mental functions, as Valsiner put it, "entail intentionality, goal-directedness, and flexibility in adjusting to the world – and adjusting the world to oneself. Their world is made into a socio-moral world through their actions" (Valsiner, 2014:17). In the following, we argue for a broader definition of the concept of action than theoretical references to the "intentionality" or "goal-directedness" of our actions allow. A complex typology of actions and explanations of actions differentiates not only our ideas of the practical-symbolic production, reproduction and transformation of meanings but also our theoretical idea of a "subject" capable of action.

The theoretically and methodologically focus of cultural psychology (no matter how it intends and undertakes this in detail) is thus on the symbolically and practically constituted or mediated meanings that explicitly or implicitly orient individual and social lives. In relation to this, it has presented overwhelming, highly diverse findings in the course of the last decades, which today are also compiled in voluminous, informative handbooks and textbooks of cultural and cross-cultural psychology (e.g., Cole, 1996, Cohen & Kitayama, 2019; Kim et al., 2006; Matsumoto, 2001; Matsumoto & Juang, 2013; Trommsdorff & Kornadt, 2007a, 2007b; Valsiner, 2012; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007).

The insight into the primary sociality of man, which has always been widespread in sociology, is thus also shared by cultural psychology based on action theory (and Valsiner's cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics). It does so even if it stands up for the irreducible individuality of the person and rejects any "social determinism" that summarily turns persons into "cultural dopes" (as Harold Garfinkel, of all people, said, the astute founder of ethnomethodology, which, as is well known, placed rules in the form of social norms at the centre of research interest). The social and the cultural help determine what we should understand by the concept of the psychic but do not make the individually psychic or the unmistakable individual disappear. In general, the subject should not be hastily dismissed but at most theoretically differentiated and decentred. One can still hold on to this today and continue to work on it (after the post/structuralist exaggerations have lost their appeal). In the action-theoretical foundation of cultural psychology, all the points of view mentioned so far are duly brought to bear – if only the theory of action claimed is sufficiently developed.

In the following, I would first like to present basic features of a typologically differentiated theory of action, which is at the same time a theory of variable forms of understanding explanation of action. This theory has been developed in detail elsewhere (Straub, 1999a, 2021a, 2021b). It stands in a tradition represented above only by two exemplary, admittedly outstanding, approaches. As with Boesch and Bruner, the line of thought taken in the Erlangen working group around Hans Werbik – in which I was privileged to participate in my younger years – led from action theory to cultural psychology (Werbik, 1978, 1985, Kaiser & Werbik, 2012). To this day, I myself feel a close affinity to a psychological approach whose proximity to certain varieties of (hermeneutic and analytic) philosophy is as unmistakable as its kinship with some empirical neighbouring disciplines, such as interpretive sociology (e.g., of pragmatist provenance or in the guise of symbolic interactionism). In general, the inter- and transdisciplinary orientation is a hallmark of this approach (cf. Chakkarath & Weidemann, 2018; Kölbl & Sieben, 2018; Straub & Chakkarath, 2019, Straub & Werbik 1999). For example, the areas in which the conception advocated here has taken the form of a “narrative psychology” (Straub, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2021a) could not be understood without considering the obvious borrowings from historical scholarship, specifically from the philosophical theory of history and historical thought. And current efforts to extend this initially language-theoretical and textual approach into the field of interpretive, iconological psychology, which finally also increasingly attends to the meaning of images in our psychosocial practice, would certainly not have come about without in-depth engagement with advanced approaches to art or image studies (Straub, Przyborski & Plontke, 2021; Plontke, Przyborski & Straub, 2021).

The interdisciplinary orientation of the psychology of action and culture that I represent is probably also clearly expressed in what follows. There, we deal with topics that have always been important for an action-theoretical cultural psychology and are still highly relevant (cf. also Miller, 1997). Without sophisticated action and subject theory, cultural psychology suffers. It would, one could say, not be completely with itself. It would be deprived of central pillars on which its thinking and research rest. The two pillars are connected with each other: The conception of a decentred subject or the idea of decentred autonomy interwoven with it is perfectly compatible with a theoretical typology of action that goes beyond the narrow limits of the intentionalist rational model commonly used in psychology. It saves action theory from rationalistic “illusions of autonomy” (Meyer-Drawe, 1990). Indeed, a typologically differentiated theory of action addresses action in its multiple dependencies and contingencies. In contrast to some postmodern critiques of the “autonomous subject of reason”, however, it does not say goodbye to “autonomy”, “reason” or the “subject” but provides arguments for a complexity-increasing revision of these terms.

The acting subject is commonly conceived in psychology as intentional, i.e., (usually) as an agent acting in a conscious and controlled way, at any rate intentionally, goal-oriented or purposeful, and thereby rational at least according to subjective judgment. This coupling of the concept of action to a “strong” and at the same time rather special conception of autonomy is by no means inevitable. It can be left

behind as soon as alternative, complementary conceptualizations are placed alongside the intentionalist model. Thus, the claim is made to do more justice to the reality of action in a phenomenological-descriptive perspective and, on top of that, to open up fruitful perspectives for the scientific analysis and understanding explanation of actions. At the same time, these action-typological differentiations lead to a welcome decentring of merely partially autonomous subjects. The linking of action-theoretical considerations with subject- or identity-theoretical reflections towards the end of the paper highlights a factual affinity between two sets of topics that are usually dealt with separately in psychology. Our conceptual-theoretical determination of an “action” touches the question of “who we are, have become and would like to be”. Theories of action and identity express how we might reasonably understand and treat ourselves as persons.

## 2 An Aged Fixation of Action-Theoretical Thinking

In the following, I am, of course, not concerned with a deletion and replacement of the intentionalist rational model of human action but with its relativization and supplementation within the framework of a theoretical typology. This also concerns the (economic, game- and decision-theoretical) principle of utility maximization, which is claimed in many psychological theories of action. Even if intentionalist theories of action take into account the principal limitation and fallibility of subjective knowledge guiding action, they are closely linked to the notion of a decision and action subject, potentially taking into account all facts relevant to action, ideally just fully rational (e.g., Groeben, 1986; on this Straub & Weidemann, 2015). “Contextual” or “situational” aspects are as much part of the horizon of the intentional and rational actor as the consequences and side effects of the targeted action. In psychological theories, actions mostly function as supposedly expedient means of a subjectively rational actor who wants to achieve certain goals and has his reasons for doing or refraining from doing something specific.<sup>1</sup>

Many aspects of the action-theoretical conception of man as a reflexive, proactive subject can be based on good reasons – this should not be forgotten especially in psychology. They played an essential role in the criticism of a psychological anthropology that wanted to see in man little more than a passive stimulus-response mechanism. Numerous creative innovations in twentieth century psychology owe much to action-theoretical rearrangements of the scientific vocabulary and the accompanying broadening of horizons and perspectives. However, a cognitivist, rationalist exaggeration of our practice and an (often subliminal) idealization of “egologically” and “cognitivistically” conceived, “rational subjects of action” quickly crept into these renewals (Zielke, 2004), unnecessarily narrowing action

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<sup>1</sup>Theories of action that take into account other aspects of an anthropologically understood faculty of reason besides purposive rationality are the exception in psychology (see, e.g., Aschenbach, 1984).

psychology research and, on top of that, tying it to questionable valorative and normative foundations. The lamentable narrowing of a practice conceptualized in terms of action theory is encountered primarily in the reduction of human action to a specific type, precisely the intentionalist or teleological model.

Especially since Georg H. von Wright's (1974) influential attempt to make Aristotle's scheme of practical syllogism fruitful as a formal explanatory scheme for the sciences of action, this model is considered to be groundbreaking and binding at least where hermeneutic-explanatory tasks of the subject, social and cultural sciences are concerned.<sup>2</sup> The teleological or intentionalist model does not only give the formal structure of (methodical-rational) explanations of action. First of all, it implies a specific concept of action, which prescribes how an action is to be understood and described in principle. Within the framework of this model, an action can in principle be represented as a mode of behaviour whose inner structure has two constitutive elements that are commonly summarized as a "motivational-cognitive" or "volitional-cognitive" complex. This means, on the one hand, every actor pursues certain intentions or purposes in and with his actions. He wants to achieve this or that. Second, he does this on the basis of a subjective system of knowledge, belief or opinion, which identifies the action in question as a (supposedly) appropriate, rational means for achieving the purpose pursued in each case.

Action is "goal-directed, planned behavior", writes Groeben (1986, 71). Boesch (1980, 107; cf. also Boesch, 1991; Werbik, 1978, 50; further examples in von Cranach & Harré, 1982) states that "goal anticipation is almost always the most important criterion of action. Productive or preventive actions are intended to influence something in the material or social world in a way that is as self-determined as possible. The actions of purposive subjects aim primarily at the instrumental and strategic control of the external (material, social) and the internal world. This view of our practice seems all too one-sided. It is not compatible with the scientific goal of a differentiated understanding and description of our practice of action. Moreover, this one-sidedness prevents us from explaining actions adequately and from relying on different explanatory models for this purpose.

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<sup>2</sup>Von Wright's view departs from the scheme of the deterministic or probabilistic explanatory model. His model shears from the framework of nomological thinking (classically, Hempel & Oppenheim, 1948). Rather, it is a specification of a particular type of understanding, the understanding or interpretive explanation of actions. For a formalization or schematization of this and all models of action explanation distinguished below, see Straub (1999a) at length. In a perspective tailored to social and especially cultural studies, Andreas Reckwitz (2000, 91ff.) also offers explanatory theoretical considerations. While I share his basic intention of differentiating and pluralizing explanatory models, I consider his proposal of an independent, specifically cultural studies model of action explanation "underdetermined". His "model" is far from the level of precision of the schematized, formalized alternatives against which Reckwitz demarcates his explanatory attempt. It remains unclear whether this model of cultural studies explanation ("kulturwissenschaftliche Erklärung") of action can actually be conceived as an independent variant.

### 3 The Model of Rule-Guided Action

In a reply to his critics, von Wright admitted that it is “certainly true that in EV (Erklären und Verstehen, J.S.) and in other earlier publications I have greatly overestimated the relevance of this particular [intentionalist, J.S.] model of explanation for the human sciences” (von Wright, 1978, 266). In contrast, it is now said that “there are several important patterns or schemes for explanations of action that should not be called dispositional - for the very reason, among others, that they are sharply different from types of explanation that can be unconditionally assigned this term” (ibid., 301).

The concept of rule-governed action goes beyond the framework of subjectivistic, “egological” approaches that are still widespread in psychology. It transcends the psychology of action in the direction of a decidedly social- and culture-theoretically oriented science. The model of rule-governed action, as already developed by Peter Winch (1966) following Ludwig Wittgenstein’s analysis of rule-following and recommended to the social sciences for adoption (on this in detail: Straub, 1999a, 113ff.), can be regarded as independent and not reducible to another model. Not every action has to be connected with subjective intentions, purposes, goals, or even plans. Not every action needs to be related to “teleological backgrounds” in order to be adequately identified, described, or explained as an action. Wright’s “later” also speaks of the possible action-constituting, action-regulating or action-guiding function of rules. An action such as greeting (or the formal act of marriage) is identified and also understood and explained in a specific way by being subsumed under a “societal institution”, i.e., a social rule or norm. Here, the reference to a rule is not an (additional) aspect of goal-oriented, purposeful action. It is decisive and determining for what we can identify, describe and analyse as this or that concrete action. Many linguistic and practical actions can only be described, understood or explained “by conceiving of them as actions of a particular genre, and by knowing the conventions, rules, and institutions that constitute that genre” (von Wright, 1978, 301; see also Waldenfels, 1985b, 79). From constitutive rules – think of rules of play that make a game like chess or soccer possible in the first place – regulative rules can be distinguished with John Searle. These merely regulate how an action – possible independently of the existence of the rule – is to be performed; one thinks, for example, of a speed rule in road traffic or of the request not to kiss intimately in St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome (for further differentiations of the concept of rule, Straub, 1999a, 127ff.).

The hermeneutic and explanatory analysis or the understanding explanation of actions is in many cases to be seen as a methodical reconstruction of rules constituting, defining or regulating actions. Not statistically ascertainable regularities or regularities in behavior, but the regular actions of actors, who orient and align their actions (often implicitly, empirically) to certain rules, form the object of social and cultural theory-based action sciences. Actors follow rules that are incorporated into their actions and language, as it were. Rule knowledge is often implicit, practical, habitualized knowledge. It is often not immediately available to the actors. They

follow countless rules “blindly”, so to speak. “Following a rule” then requires a habitualized skill that is acquired empirically, not explicit knowledge (Renn, 1999; Schneider, 2000). Accordingly, appropriate descriptions, understandings or explanations of actions presuppose the ability of social scientists to participate in a language game, to participate at least virtually in the way of life of those who act. Understanding linguistic, bodily and practical expressions ultimately requires being able to act in a certain way, i.e., to act according to rules that can be stated, or to continue actions according to the rule in question, to “respond” to previous events or actions according to rules (Waldenfels, 1999).

It is obvious that a theoretical perspective that understands human action as following rules (often implicitly) is a gateway for social and cultural psychological power analyses. Assuming that no one makes and voluntarily acknowledges all rules, especially the social norms he or she follows in acting, of his or her own free will, it is obvious that the social and cultural psychological analysis of constitutive and regulative rules of action can go hand in hand with the analysis of sociocultural power structures and power practices. Cultural psychology can and should adopt this perspective.

#### 4 Interim Résumé

On closer inspection, the alternative between the intentionalist model and the concept of rule-governed action still proves to be inadequate. Two aspects necessarily remain underexposed in these perspectives. On the one hand, it remains outside the field of vision that an action can be understood as a component of a temporal order and in its own temporal structure. On the other hand, a psychology of action that situates actions only in orders according to the intentionalist or rule-based model fails to recognize that actions can change orders creatively and innovatively (Waldenfels, 1987, 1990a). As can be shown, both of these aspects, i.e., the (doubly understood) temporality and creativity of action (Joas, 1992; Waldenfels, 1990d, 1999), are equally well accommodated in the narrative model of action (cf. Straub, 1999a, 141ff.; summarized in several chapters in Straub, 2021a; as a concrete example: 2019d). This has not least to do with the fact that both time-theoretical and creativity-theoretical considerations revolve around the notion of contingency and are equally sensitive to the dynamics of action. The intentionalist and rule-governed models of action, on the other hand, refrain from doing just that. They only know action that is conceived either as following pre-existing intentions or as following pre-existing rules. How intentions and rules arise or are modified in the execution of temporally structured, dynamic and creative action cannot be addressed within the framework of these models. For this purpose, the psychology of action is also dependent on the narrative model and thus on the speech act of narration and is thus to be conceived as narrative psychology.

## 5 The Narrative Model

The specific linguistic form of storytelling alone preserves contingency as such and makes it intelligible by integrating it into a narratively constituted context of meaning. Storytelling fulfils a descriptive and autoexplanatory function without eliminating contingency: Narratives sometimes provide descriptions and explanations (also) of actions that are not reducible to or replaceable by any other form of description and explanation. All sciences dealing with temporally complex phenomena as well as with the creativity of action rely on narratives (Danto, 1980; Straub, 1999a, 141ff.).

The visualization of temporally structured contexts of meaning, which because of the unique temporal structure of narrative sentence systems must take the form of a narrated story, first of all makes it possible to bring up “historical”, i.e., biographical or historical, reasons for actions. Already, this direction of view and analysis focus again on the dependencies of human action and on the limits of the autonomy of the subject. If actions are conceived as (provisional) end points of a tellable story, then what is true for every possible end of a narrative applies to them: The end of a story is linked to its beginning and its middle in such a way that it becomes clear that the action in question is a component of a story that is not within the power of disposal of the persons involved in this story. Even as something proper, willed and intended by the actor, the action placed in the horizon of a history that is unavailable as a whole also appears as something partially accidental, contingent, which means as something that could have come differently, “which is not fixed to a single being-so” (Makropoulos, 1989, 26). The unavailability of everything historically constituted also characterizes action. Contingency is a characteristic of both collective history and the life history of individuals. Reinhart Koselleck (1985) aptly describes chance as the motivational residue of historiography. This insight can be adopted by all action sciences interested in temporally complex realities. The concept of coincidence saves every “history” from the claim of its total planability and producibility. History and biography and the actions embedded in these temporal processes, not least the temporally structured collective and personal identities that emerge, change and pass away in stories, are inevitably permeated by coincidences (Sommer, 1988, 162ff.). Living with chance is a necessity.

Under the aspect of its creativity, action appears again but in a different way than under the aspect of its historicity and inner temporal structure, as partially contingent, as something that eludes the gapless power of disposal of reflexive, rational actors. As in the case of historically determined action, from the perspective of a theory of the creativity of action (Joas, 1992; Waldenfels, 1990d), actions can only be adequately identified, described and explained in an understanding way within the framework of the narrative model. Only narratives preserve contingency experiences as such by speaking of what still, as it were, happens to and befalls actors even when they – spontaneously and creatively – take an acting stance on the world and on themselves.

Whoever acts creatively disregards one or the other time-honoured rule, and always this action takes place without exact intention and perfect foresight of the result and its consequences. A certain degree of spontaneity is constitutive of creativity. In creative action, which “always has something of a negotiation” (Waldenfels, 1985c, 132), the rules possibly followed and goals pursued are at best formed in the course of action, and existing rules and goals are modified in unpredictable ways. Creative action not only follows logos but it also “creates its own logos” (Waldenfels, 1980, 265; 1990d, 84). In this regard, Waldenfels speaks of a poietic function of practice and always places the “logos of the practical world” also under the sign of creativity or productivity.

Viewed also from the aspect of its creativity, action appears partially withdrawn from the determining control of the intentional, reflexive, rational, autonomous subject. Human practice and the individual actions of individual actors now possess a peculiarly anonymous trait. To be sure, creativity is, on the one hand, an important aspect of human self-determination and self-realization since it is precisely creative acts that can produce not only changes in the world but changes in the world and in the self. On the other hand, creative processes of self-determination and self-realization are not processes that subjects could completely dominate and control. Analysed under the aspect of creativity, action acquires an impersonal note. Like the history in which it is embedded and which it perpetuates, it now appears as something in which the actor is involved without having intentionally produced it and being able to control it.

The boundaries between subject and world are no longer completely sharp in this theoretical view. Action acquires an “event-like” moment, and the well-rehearsed dividing lines between inside and outside, between activity and passivity, between action and passion, and between agent and patient become questionable as soon as the concept of creative action deals with an intermediate area in which the centres of action just distinguished can no longer be completely kept apart. The theory of the creativity of action, like already the narrative-theoretical approach to a temporally mediated and in turn temporally structured action, bids farewell to the notion of the intentional, reflexive, and rational subject as an undisturbed centre of unbroken autonomy and auto-practice. For the psychology of action and culture represented here, this insight is indispensable and central.

## 6 Where Is the Subject, and What Kind of Subject?

The above weakening of the autonomous subject of reason and action also pervades a good part of the works of Bernhard Waldenfels (e.g., 1987, 46ff., 155ff.). However, this author is far from a mere swan song to the subject. Waldenfels’ weakening of the subject is concerned with an understanding of the principally limited possibilities of “rational consciousness” to control practice and even its own actions. In contrast to the rationalist vision of a total control of action, he emphasizes, well phenomenologically, its corporeality (“Leiblichkeit”), which contributes

considerably to the unpredictability of the rational subject of action, but also a kind of say in the situation in which action is taken. This right to a say is so radically conceived that the situation does not merely appear as something that the actor (reasonably) has to take into account. Rather, in Waldenfels' thinking, the situation becomes a centre of action that cannot be fully controlled and yet plays into action (see also Joas, 1992, 236). The same can be said of the things we find in this or that situation: They too – even in their mere materiality – participate in an often imperceptible way in the consummation of our action. This also seems to me the rational core of Bruno Latour's (2008) "symmetrical anthropology", which admittedly should not lead to an untenable, metaphorical-anthropomorphic endowment of things with "agency".

Actions can themselves descend into the anonymity of a more or less masterless event: Their corporeality, the "inner foreign country" (Sigmund Freud), the voices of social others, the materiality of things, linguistic and sociocultural structures, institutions and practices, in short "the multiplicity of references and contexts into which it (action, J.S.) enters" (Waldenfels, 1990c, 74; cf. also 1999), rob the subject of the status of an unassailable, entirely self-sufficient and autonomous act-centre. All these aspects become thematic and accessible for scientific analysis not least in (self-)stories that a person tells.

Does the concept of action and subject still make sense under these conditions? The narrative model of action description and action explanation, which is open to the thematization of contingency and the manifold references that enter into and co-determine the symbolic, situated action of a bodily subject, seems to transform action theory unawares into a theory of anonymous structures and processes, which has banished the intentional, reflexive, rational and autonomous subject from its once so comfortable position and in the end has said goodbye to it completely. This danger cannot be overlooked. However, it can be countered in a subtle, not merely defensive way. The complete slide into a completely anonymous "it speaks" or "it acts" can be prevented by considering actions "as dosed mixtures of doing, happening and re-experiencing, of one's own and foreign. This mixture could no longer be dealt with by disjunctive, but by accentuating conceptualizations" (Waldenfels, 1990b, 55; also 1990c, 76). Everything that "makes our linguistic and practical actions possible by constraining them, and constrains them by making them possible, eludes the alternative of a self- or foreign legislation" (Waldenfels, 1990c, 78; see also Meyer-Drawe, 1990).

## **7 A Final Look at the Decentred Subject and a Theory of Personal Identity**

The action typology outlined opposes the notion of a subject "strong" by virtue of intentionality, reflexivity, rationality, and its own will. It brings into play the concept of an autonomy that is always constrained, limited and thwarted by contingency and

heteronomy (Meyer-Drawe, 1990). With Honneth (1993, 151), this partial autonomy can be described as decentred, implying a form of subjectivity and identity structured in such a way that “intersubjective” powers function (developmentally) psychologically as constitutional conditions of subject formation and autonomy development: “The personal freedom or self-determination of individuals is understood here in such a way that it appears not as an opposition to but rather as a particular form of organization of contingent forces beyond any individual control”. Honneth determines his intersubjectivity-theoretical concept of decentred autonomy in particular following George H. Mead as well as psychoanalytic models such as that of Donald Winnicott. First of all, the author distinguishes the socio-psychological meaning of the concept of autonomy besides the moral-philosophical as well as the legal-theoretical meaning. The latter means “in a normative sense, the empirical ability of concrete subjects [...] to determine their lives as a whole freely and without constraint” (ibid., 154). “Autonomy” here denotes a “degree of psychological maturity” that is supposed to be associated in particular with two kinds of abilities or characteristics: The autonomous subject in the traditional, “strong” sense knows his or her personal needs and is aware of the meaning attached to his or her acts. In short, he or she acts on the basis of “transparency of needs and intentionality of meaning” (ibid.). It is precisely these preconditions that are doubted by the critique of the “autonomous (action) subject”, which is also so important for Honneth and which has been in vogue at least since Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic disillusionments as well as the language-theoretical critique of the concept of meaning intentionality by Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example. (Certainly, Friedrich Nietzsche has also contributed his mite). Precisely, these presuppositions are thus revised as soon as there is talk of “decentred autonomy”, “decentred subject”, “decentred identity” and a theory of action compatible with such notions.

Specifically, Honneth argues for a theoretical decentring of autonomy that encompasses the three “dimensions of the individual’s relationship to inner nature, to one’s own life as a whole, and finally to the social world; unconstrained and free self-determination [...] then requires special abilities with regard to dealing with drive nature, with the organization of one’s own life, and with the moral demands of the environment” (ibid., 157f.). This means that the criteria of the “classical” conception of a “strong” subject are replaced or supplemented by criteria of a decentred autonomy. This involves three things:

1. “The classical goal of needs transparency must [...] be replaced by the notion of linguistic articulateness” (ibid., 158), which means that the “creative but always incomplete tapping of the unconscious” (ibid.) is just as important as a relationship as free of fear as possible to impulses for action that cannot be controlled and can at best be symbolized and reflected upon in retrospect.
2. “The idea of biographical consistency should be replaced by the notion of a narrative coherence of life”, which means that one refrains from subordinating one’s life to a “single reference of meaning” (ibid., 159) but rather represents and reflects on it in the course of a narrative synthesis of the heterogeneous (Paul

Ricœur, 1988, 1996) – again and again anew and in new ways. Accordingly, Paul Ricœur speaks of “oneself as another”.

3. “The idea of principle orientation [should] finally be supplemented by the criterion of moral context sensitivity” (ibid., 158). Thus, decentred autonomy includes the ability of persons to “relate in a reflective way to the moral claims of the environment” without rigidly orienting themselves to universalizable principles of morality. Rather, such persons are able to “apply these principles responsibly with affective sympathy and sensitivity to the concrete circumstances of the individual case” (ibid., 161).

All three points mark clear shifts in the meaning of “autonomy”. No matter how one further defines the concept of decentred autonomy, the following can be stated according to the action-theoretical arguments presented: In the perspective outlined, the acting subject is pretty much always beyond total autonomy and overwhelming heteronomy. The acting subject is placed between total dependence and total autonomy. It is weakened even before we bring into the field the concept of “Widerfahrnis” (experience/happening/affect) as a contrastive counter-concept to the concept of action. The cultural-psychological study of our practice, of course, can by no means do without an in-depth analysis of “Widerfahrnisse”. Last but not least, the painful dark sides of our lives, which are linked to adversities, are part of human existence (Straub, 1999a, 41ff.). In addition to adverse circumstances and events, happy ones naturally also fall under the concept of the “Widerfahrnis”.

Modern identity theories in psychology and sociology are aware of the facts outlined (Bamberg et al., 2021). In my view, the differential theory of action outlined fits seamlessly with the outlines of modern theories of personal identity (Straub, 2016, 139–166, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). If one visualizes the contours of the “modern” concept of identity, developed in its basic features in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in American pragmatism and in psychoanalysis, and differentiated in the twentieth century within the framework of these and other theoretical currents, one becomes acquainted with a concept that is by no means determined in a substantialist or essentialist way. It also does not offer food for criticism that “identity” is necessarily linked to irreversible determinations and immovably stable orders, orientations and practices. It resists the notion of all too persistent structural solidifications and hardenings of a person, which no longer knows the experience of difference, ambivalence, ambiguity, alterity, alienity, temporality, historicity, contingency and dynamics that are constitutive for modern subjects and even suppresses them. Nor can there be any question of the concept of personal identity defended here promoting, on top of everything else, a relationship to the self and the world that tends to be shaped by violence. Nor does the harmonistic image of personalities who are at peace with themselves, always self-confident and therefore empowered to make decisions, who know what they want and can do in every situation and for this very reason attain a kind of “perpetual autonomy of action”, fit at all with the thinking to which the important conceptions of personal identity in modern subject, social and cultural studies owe their origin.

With metaphors that emphatically refer to the “openness” or “liquefaction of identity”, or with references to hitherto allegedly repressed “dependencies” or the inescapable “relationality” of the subject, in my opinion, nothing really new can be said today, at least hardly anything that has not already been considered in the discourse on identity theory for a good century – and which can be specified in the context of the modern theory of personal identity, not least in an action-theoretical perspective. Reflections on the concept of action on the one hand and on the concept of identity on the other hand are connected not least by the following: If we have reasonably elaborated theoretical concepts in mind, we will admittedly still want to refine and improve some things. However, I do not see any justified reasons for throwing the available, richly complex concepts of action and identity overboard without further ado, nor do I see anything completely new on the horizon of an emerging future. Of course, this is not so tragic as long as we keep in mind what we have known for a long time, namely, that there is no action and no identity that does not show more or less clear traces of contingency and heteronomy. We are never fully with ourselves, not even when we think we are acting independently, autonomously and self-determined. For a contemporary action-theoretical cultural psychology, this insight is central.

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# Valsiner on Facts: Making Culture Explicit?



Bo A. Christensen

*Wer keiner Tatsache Gewiss ist,  
der kann auch das Sinnes seiner  
Worte nicht Gewiss Sein (If you are not certain of any fact, you  
cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either.)*  
Wittgenstein, *Über Gewissheit* 114

## 1 Introduction

I first got acquainted with Jaan when I, during my PhD, submitted an article to Culture and Psychology – Jaan is chief editor – and got the answer back that the article would fit another journal which Jaan also was running, namely, IBPS. The article got published, luckily, and fast-forward a couple of years, I started, again luckily, working at Aalborg University. There, I became affiliated with the Center for Cultural Psychology, where I got to meet and talk with Jaan in person.

Now, I would claim that everybody knowing Jaan knows that he is a very generous person, especially when it comes to engaging with students, writing letters of accommodation, commenting on manuscripts, inviting people to contribute to books, giving talks, etc. This is not just my opinion. It is manifested in numerous books, article tributes, evaluations, and former students climbing up the very difficult academic ladder. Jaan would probably say that these are all different meaning-making moves creating a narrative about him – that he is a fiction, as he once claimed of Umberto Eco (Valsiner 2009). It is, however, still something of a real narrative, a kind of *fact* – perhaps of the matter, perhaps of something else – of what *actually* (contested or not) goes into being Jaan Valsiner, i.e., the feats, accomplishments, stories, and occurrences tied to the cultural psychologist and educator.

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I will, in the following, focus on this notion of facts. To me, Valsiner is not very keen on the idea of appealing to facts in psychology. I am going to argue that he is, to a certain degree, right. However, my reservation is that his view on the notion of facts is too narrow, and this prevents him from engaging aspects of the institutional and objective character of cultural phenomena. Relating to the implicit pragmatist presuppositions in his Peircean semiotics, I will suggest using Robert Brandom's social philosophy for making the factual character of cultural phenomena explicit. The intention here is to initiate a dialogue between Valsinerian cultural psychology and a representative of contemporary pragmatism. Brandom connects a normative pragmatics with an inferentialist semantics in an effort of making the normative character of the facts, established through our engagement with the world, explicit. Understood in this way, an additional aim of Valsinerian theory-building would be supplying us with a semiotic meta-vocabulary for making our implicit cultural (normative and factual) practices explicit.

## 2 Some Facts About Facts

Paraphrasing Wootton (2016, 251ff), *fact* etymologically originates (from fifteenth century onward) in relation to the Latin *factum*, events, deeds, and achievements – stressing the concrete result of a related process or action. Thus, it is also tied to the Latin verb *facere*, to do, with an emphasis on actuality as something that occurs or has actually occurred, in distinction to just believing it occurred. The distinction between believing something and the actuality of something provided the later basis for understanding something known to be true, as in a *matter of fact*, i.e., what is contingently the case, and which we know in an empirical or a posteriori way. Here, the connection with our doing something as related to facts seems to be downplayed, being replaced with a search for what we now term evidence.

This is the distinction Hume made famous in Sect. IV of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*: “All the objects of human reason or inquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact.” And it appears some centuries later in positivism as a distinction between two kinds of knowledge expressed through two kinds of sentences: tautological or analytical a priori vs. synthetic a posteriori. Corresponding to the relations of ideas in Hume were analytical sentences, the truth of which was established by conventions of language alone. Synthetic sentences, however, depended upon empirically establishing whether things were as claimed by the sentence in question (i.e., did it correspond to whatever facts were claimed, whether could the sentence be verified). It is clear that facts here indicate natural facts as *opposed* to conventions – we can choose to change our language but not gravity. Thus, facts came out ontologically on the side of natural science studied through empirical methods – as something like verified occurrences existing independently of knowledge and beliefs, with questions of values instead being delegated to studies within the humanities (Putnam, 2002).

Now, Valsiner has, in several places, discussed the notion of fact in relation to psychology and mostly by emphasizing the negative implications of the above. For example, how some understandings of psychology have failed to recognize the complexity of knowledge processes as processes of synthesis, and instead emphasized psychological knowledge as primarily being about an accumulation of facts (Valsiner, 2007). In the epilogue of Valsiner (2014), it is claimed that “as such, psychology’s data are signs, not facts” (p. 259). The context here is the possibility of studying history, with evidence of the past only possible through culturally mediated signs. Facts, as the opposite of signs, seem therefore to resemble the accumulation just noted, only here as an accumulation of “dead” things. Three years later, writing on the relationship between science and facts, it is claimed:

The “finished nature” of the facts and data is a natural result of our inquiry as it is delimited within irreversible time. Yet—science is not collecting facts and classifying these into pre-established categories. Instead, science explores new knowledge—which, from its beginning, is not knowledge at all. It may be an insight, a hint, a hypothesis—but not a fact. (Valsiner, 2017, 19)

Though writing specifically about scientific methodology, we can still ask, epistemologically, whether facts cannot be a part of the exploration of new knowledge. Well, not here since the relevant foundation of science is data and not facts. Data are constructed or derived entities – through the use of our methods and inquiries – and not standing alone facts as Valsiner (2017, 28) claims. Facts for Valsiner then are on par with his – let’s term it – anti-naturalistic tendency. As Mammen puts it in his contribution, “...nature, in this perspective, before being ‘invaded’ by signs is of no significant importance for understanding specific human life as studied in psychology. Nature is so to say passive and silent, or anonymous, in the creation of humans.” And Mammen claims instead that the capacity for meaning-making must depend on some sort of species-specific capacity preparation for sign-use, if any appeal to signs is not to be circular.

I think the same kind of reasoning can be directed against Valsiner’s understanding of the notion of facts. Facts seem to be like the occurrences referred to above, conceived as something existing independently of knowledge and beliefs, unlike the data being “valuable” as signs through our semiotic analysis. Thus, if my understanding here is correct, Valsiner seems to uphold, perhaps inadvertently, a distinction between facts and values, nature and culture, etc., with the former pairs in the distinction not playing any significant role within cultural psychology (i.e., not playing any part in the exploring of new knowledge). I agree with the anti-naturalistic tendency and psychological science as not about data accumulation but primarily when these are *reductionist*, i.e., not understanding psychological phenomena as part of the wholeness of life they are part of. So I think there is reason to consider the notion of fact as covering more ground and being of more importance than as what seems like an antithesis to values or *cultural* psychology as an exploration of new knowledge.

For Putnam (2002), any rigorous division between factual and normative and between analytical and empirical is an untenable residue from logical positivism

and should therefore be disregarded. The notion of fact here is simply conceived as too narrow. Instead, we should consider that all facts are related to values, and every value is related to facts (Putnam, 2002, 136–137). Now, two implications follow from this. The first is that any factual description of something implicitly presupposes some relevant normative considerations, for example, how any quantitative psychological research presupposes considerations of what it is to be a human psychological creature with specific interests, values, etc. The second implication is that when we emphasize particular normative considerations, specific factual relationships are implicitly expressed as relevant as well. If, for example, education is considered important, then the availability of books, computers, and teachers are facts to consider. And if we bring this up to a more general level, different kinds of factual relationships will be relevant to consider in relation to cultural psychology as well. We have already touched upon Mammen's emphasizing of the relevance of natural facts above; I will here supply this with a focus on another kind of fact.

This way of considering facts is going back to at least Durkheim and J. S. Mill, namely, social facts, which is the kind of factuality I focus on here. Both Mill and Durkheim are problematic, however, but interesting to learn from. Mill is problematic since he considers social phenomena as being build out of the psychological states of individual people, opposite the anti-psychologicistic (Kusch, 1995) tendency of cultural psychology. In itself, the social has no factuality (saying "us" means nothing more than what you and I put into it). The opposite is the case with Durkheim. He defined social facts as "...any way of acting, whether ruled or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint..." (Durkheim, 1982, 59). Social facts for Durkheim involved cultural phenomena like kinship, marriage, as well as money. These function as social institutions exerting an influence on us through the norms instituted within the practices we engage with each other in. The problem here is that there is no room for an individualized uptake of whatever influence the institutions exert on people; social facts were to be understood in terms of other social facts. Beneath both Mill and Durkheim, we might say, lies the problem of understanding the mutual constitution of persons and culture, individuals, and social facts. In other words, a challenge of understanding this mutual constitution is more than what is happening in either of our "heads," but at the same time as something individuals *as* the individuals they are, can contribute to. Several social theorists have addressed this challenge with a focus on social facts (e.g., Gilbert, 1989; Searle, 1995), also more recently by within the framework of social ontology and collective intentionality (e.g., Epstein, 2015; Schmid, 2005). Given the implicit pragmatist background of Valsiner's semiotic cultural psychology, I will, however, suggest another way of considering the notion of social fact as relevant within a cultural psychological context, namely, by sketching some trajectories from a contemporary pragmatist, namely, Robert Brandom's hugely influential work, whereas in Peirce – one of the main inspirations for Valsiner – facts are in general related to secondness, as signs being actual and existentially correlated to objects as a factuality (Valsiner, 2014, 90). For Brandom, facts are understood more broadly as involved in our speech acts – the use of signs, symbols, and language – while the personalization is understood as the establishing of a semantic self-consciousness.

### 3 Making It Explicit: Cultural Pragmatics and Inferential Semantics

So what I want to do here is, very briefly, sketch an approach incorporating facts based on Brandom's work. The foundation will be a normative pragmatics presenting facts as an implicit part of how we normatively engage the world and an inferential semantics – containing structural elements similar to semiotics – functioning as a theoretical vocabulary of making these implicit facts explicit. Transferring this to a Valsinerian cultural psychology, the semiotic vocabulary could be supplied with a function in the same *expressive* way – developing and using an increasingly specialized semiotic and semantic vocabulary as a means of establishing a context-sensitive articulation of the implicit norms and facts presupposed within cultural psychological practices.

Overall, then, the departure will be Brandom's early work in *Making It Explicit* with its inferentialist conception of rationality. The core part of this conception is aiming to specify the structure that a set of performances within a social practice must have for the participants to count as sapient beings by virtue of their participation in the practice and for the performances within the practice to have *factual* semantic content by virtue of their featuring within the practice.

#### *An Example: The Queen's Shilling*

We will use an example, a simplified version of an eighteenth-century British practice (fictional or not), namely, the taking of the queen's shilling (see MIE, 162, Brandom, 1998), as a departure for describing Brandom's position. Imagine London in the mid-eighteenth century. The pubs are full of drunk men, some of them out of money and willing to "receive" a coin or two from naval officers. The catch being taking "the queen's shilling" from a recruiting officer committed the recipient to future military service. Thus, taking the coin had the same significance that signing a contract would have – in this case joining the navy undertaking all the commitments entailed by that change of status.

As Brandom describes it, the official rationale was that such overt irrevocable nonlinguistic performance was required given that those enlisting were largely illiterate. However, "...the actual function of the practice was to enable 'recruiting' by disguised officers, who frequented taverns and offered what was, unbeknownst to their victims, the queen's shilling, as a gesture of goodwill to those who had drunk up all of their own money" (MIE, 162). Hence, those who accepted found out the significance of their actions, i.e., the commitment they had undertaken, and so the alteration of their status only upon awakening from the resulting stupor.

For Brandom, this exemplifies the normative character of our practices in the sense that by (being tricked into) taking the shilling, the poor sailor commits himself unwittingly. His status is thereby changed to "hired," with the possibility of

being sanctioned – court-martialed – for not fulfilling the obligations implicitly connected with the act. The brute physical fact of the coin and it being handed over, therefore, comes with the social fact of a complex normative grid of commitments, entitlements, and consequences expressed through intentional stances of the partaker’s attitudes and statuses, i.e., of being taken as committed and the actual consequences and entitlements following from this being committed. So literally, there are two sides to a coin, and both are factual.

### *Normative Pragmatics*

Let us bring out some general points from this example showing what, according to Brandom, is meant by normativity and pragmatics. The pragmatic core of Brandom’s thinking comes out in his claim that “semantics must answer to pragmatics” (MIE, 83). Any propositional structure we can express as a knowledge claim, a knowing *that*, must be related to some social practice, a knowing *how*. Knowing that there are consequences coming from taking the shilling becomes substantiated first when we can show how these consequences are institutionalized. Thus, for Brandom, the pragmatic significance of different kinds of speech acts, i.e., the use of language, signs, and symbols, “...are rendered theoretically in terms of how those performances affect the *commitments* (and the *entitlements* to those commitments) acknowledged or otherwise acquired by those whose performances they are,” and the norms implicit in practice “...are accordingly presented in *deontic* form. But these deontic statuses are understood in turn as a form of social *status*, instituted by the practical attitudes of those who attribute and acknowledge such statuses” (MIE, xiii–xiv).

Thus, norms are kinds of social facts and have, through their normativity conferred on them by the people acknowledging them, a non-reducible character. Their deontic status cannot be reduced to something natural, for instance, but must be explained, made explicit, from within the normative space they are part of. Now, the attentive reader will probably remark that this seems to be somewhat circular, explaining norms in terms of norms, and Brandom will claim that a minimal circularity will have to be accepted. We will return to this below.

Before moving on to how participating in these normative practices confer content on the speech acts – signs, symbols, language – used therein, we might ask about the relation between social and natural facts, how the “thinglike” character of the shilling goes together with its normative status. For Brandom, the discursive practices involving the speech acts incorporate real things. They are, as he claims, “solid – as one might say *corporeal*: they involve actual bodies, including both our own and the others (animate and inanimate) we have practical and empirical dealings with” (MIE, 332). So our normative practices are not to be conceived as “hollow” structures waiting to be filled up with something *outside* of them – like a word and what it refers to or a sign and its content. Instead, they are to be understood as concrete as driving in nails with a hammer or taking the Queen’s shilling. Hence,

what definite practices a community has depends on the facts and objects they engage with. Thus, according to Brandom, “The way the world is, constrains the proprieties of inferential, doxastic and practical commitment in a straightforward way from *within* those practices” (MIE, 332). Appealing to the way the world is, is thus *not* appealing to facts as something standing alone and explored by objectifying methods not recognizing the human character of any perspective. It can only be explored from *within* a practice, accepting the mutual conditioning of facts and values and persons and the world they engage with. Thus, any other coin or object than a British shilling wouldn’t do within the practice of recruiting above. Nevertheless, the same particular coin could be used by another person for buying groceries, thus constraining the inferential proprieties differently from within a different practice. What is taken as a fact can thus also turn out *not* to be a fact.

### *Inferential Semantics*

Now as just said, it is the normative practices that confer content on our meaning-making. Brandom conceives this meaning-making in terms of an inferentialism which is holistic, as well as pragmatic and structured in a propositional sense.

Let’s first note that Brandom privileges inference over reference when it comes to understanding our practices, i.e., that what makes our uses of signs, symbol, and concepts be *about* something is not primarily that they refer to something but that they are caught up in inferential connections to other signs, symbols, and concepts. Following the points above that semantics must answer to pragmatics, as well as our meaning-making practices are corporeal, it will come as no surprise that the basic notion of inference is material and not formal (MIE, 97). When understanding and explaining how the concepts, symbols, and signs are used, Brandom follows a semantic tradition of claiming the “...*pragmatic priority of the propositional*.” (MIE, 79). It is to sentences that the pragmatic force is attached; hence, sentences, unlike subsentential expressions<sup>1</sup> (e.g., morphemes), are the only ones capable of *making a move in a language game*. The propositional can here be interpreted in a broad sense, so for elliptical sentences, it relates to the context in which they are used (a child pointing and exclaiming “rabbit” is thus propositionally similar to “Look, there is a rabbit”). Hence, semantic priority is given to the content expressed by sentences as well.

Consider, for example, something like the following inferential claims: *Pittsburgh is to the West of Philadelphia to Philadelphia is to the East of Pittsburgh*, the inference from *Today is Wednesday to Tomorrow will be Thursday*, and that from *Lightning is seen now to Thunder will be heard soon*. For Brandom,

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<sup>1</sup>To be fair, Brandom presents a whole semantics for subsentential expressions as well, based on the categories of *substitution* and *anaphora* – the point being that their meaning is tied up with the context in which they occur, be it a linguistic or a situational context.

It is the contents of the concepts *West* and *East* that make the first a good inference, the contents of the concepts *Wednesday*, *Thursday*, *today*, and *tomorrow* that make the second inference correct, and the contents of the concepts *lightning* and *thunder*, as well as the temporal concepts, that underwrite the third. (MIE, 98)

The meanings of these concepts (and symbols and signs) are their *correct* use, and endorsing these inferences is therefore part of grasping the involved concepts, the circumstances and consequences of using them. All these inferential claims purport therefore to express some significant facts (AR, 40; Brandom, 2001) based on our experiences obtained from within our *corporeal* practices. Understanding the use of symbols, signs, and concepts is then to have a *practical* mastery over the inferences they are involved in (expressed on a propositional level) – to be able to distinguish what follows from the applicability of the symbol, sign, or concept and what it follows from (MIE, 89). Hence, the meaning of a concept, symbol, or sign and the facts they purport to express depends on the *inferential role* they play in the practice within which they are used.

Here, the holism occurs because “one could not know something about the inferential role of one content without knowing at least something about the roles of others that could be inferred from it, or from which it could be inferred” (MIE, 90). Within a cultural psychological understanding, it is these (implicit) inferential relations, functioning as mediated transactions, our practices are made up of, which supply the content for our minded and intentional engagement with other people and the world. And it is these we try to make explicit.

### ***Theory as Vocabularies in Use and the Development of Semantic Self-consciousness***

To give an example of how complex these inferential relations can be, let us consider the concept “red.” We can understand “red” as following from “scarlet red,” as incompatible with green, but as connected with green in terms of “colors,” all given the following situations: “pointing to a scarlet red scarf, asking, what color is that?,” “as claiming that an object cannot be both red and green all over at the same time,” and “as claiming that an object can be both red and green but not all over at the same time.” Now, imagine the complexity of inferential relations which the use of different signs, symbols, and language uses are embedded in. How are we to make this explicit?

Now, Brandom’s point here is that we can use different theories – what he calls vocabularies – to make these relations explicit, i.e., for saying something that otherwise cannot be made explicit. I am going to suggest that we can understand Valsinerian semiotics along the same lines as the vocabulary Brandom primarily uses, namely, logic (as expressive). Remember, making a claim – stating a fact – is implicitly endorsing a set of inferences, and this endorsing is a sort of doing. It is a know-how allowing one to discriminate what follows from a claim or not, etc. For

Brandom, one central expressive resource for doing this is by using basic logical vocabulary as privileged:

In applying the concept *lion* to Leo, I implicitly commit myself to the applicability of the concept *mammal* to him. If my language is expressively rich enough to contain *conditionals*, I can say that *if* Leo is a lion, *then* Leo is a mammal... That Cleo is a cephalopod is good (indeed, decisive) evidence that she is not a lion. If my language is expressively rich enough to contain *negation*, I can make that implicit inferential component articulating the content of the concept *lion* explicit by saying that *if* Cleo is a cephalopod, then Cleo is *not* a mammal. (AR, 19–20)

But as Brandom (AR, 53) claims, there is nothing to prevent us from using a theological, aesthetic, or, as in our case, a semiotic vocabulary as privileged. Imagine, for example, a narrative treating Leo as a Lion but as a god instead of a mammal. In terms of Brandom's expressivist understanding, this would still imply some consequences (like "we worship Leo"; instead of zookeepers, "we feed Leo") as well as incompatibilities (like "that Lion does not look like Leo," or people not reacting to a sign of Leo, as worshippers do). The point here is simply this: the better, nuanced, and precise our theories are, the better is the expressive capacity for understanding and making explicit the complex implicit inferential relations in our different practices. And I have here suggested using Brandom's way of understanding facts as a way of developing the expressive capacity of the cultural psychology of Jaan Valsiner.

Finally, noted above was a point about circularity upon accepting that any theoretical description of a practice must have, as a departure, the same conditions as controlling this practice. No matter how far we are from what it is we are trying to understand, we are – in a certain sense – still sharing some basic normative conditions. Two points are worth considering here. First, according to Brandom, we can describe this as if we are adopting a distanced, or better puzzled, perspective from which we interpret the practice we are trying to understand to a perspective gradually collapsing into the perspective of the practice. This happens because the analysis provides expressive means making the implicit characteristics of this practice explicit – it becomes so to speak an extension of the practice. Second, making this explicit provides an opportunity of a semantic or conceptual self-consciousness (AR, 22). A regular description of a use of signs, symbols, and language provides us with a regular understanding of this use – an account of consciousness in Brandom's Hegelianism – like Leo is a lion, this sign is the sign of, etc. But when using our theories in connection herewith, i.e., as expressive means of bringing out the inferential relations, we get an account of a kind of semantic self-consciousness. For here, achieving the capability of actually *saying* what is *done* by *saying* that Leo is a lion within a particular practice (AR, 20)<sup>2</sup> commences. Achieving semantic self-consciousness is a means of cultivating critique by either contesting or defending what is done by saying something. So while there is minimal circularity, it is a non-vicious circularity.

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<sup>2</sup>During the last 20 years, Brandom has developed this further based on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*; see Brandom (2019).

## 4 Conclusion: Opening a Dialogue

I have tried here to address, first, an unexplored territory within Jaan's profound and deep theory of cultural psychology, namely, the significance of understanding the role of facts within cultural psychological practices. Second, I have only scratched the surface of this understanding by sketching some possible trajectories for exploring this territory using a contemporary pragmatist, Robert Brandom's notions normative pragmatics, inferential semantics, and theoretical expressivity. Like many other contributors here, I take this to be less of a conclusion than an opening and invitation to discuss, if relevant, of how to develop a cultural psychological-based semantic consciousness.

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# Bridging: Some Personal Reflections



Jens Mammen 

## 1 Introduction

October 29, 2013, was a turning point in my academic life. I had been invited to participate in Jaan Valsiner's kitchen seminar and gave a presentation "*Dualisms and dualities in psychology*," not knowing that this was the beginning of a long-lasting dialogue, inspiration, and support which was summarized when I, some years later, declared Jaan to be my *midwife*, recognizing that most of my publications since 2013 would not have been born without Jaan.

The prehistory is that I, in 2009, after having retired as a professor in psychology at Aarhus University, became affiliated as an honorary professor at Aalborg University, where many of my former students now held research and teaching positions.

I was attracted by the open-minded atmosphere in Aalborg, and one of the early culminations was a seminar through some semesters with participants from psychology and philosophy, among them Svend Brinkmann, Mogens Pahuus, and Jörg Zeller, the "*Fætter-Kusine Seminar*," referring to the two fields of study as cousins. In Danish, as in German, there are different words for male and female cousins. We never decided who was who.

In fact, it was Svend who arranged that I, in 2013, was invited to the kitchen seminar and in that way got in contact with Jaan, the kitchen seminars, and the cultural psychology.

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After that followed years of participation in the kitchen seminars and many events arranged in Aalborg by Jaan and the Niels Bohr Professorship Center for Cultural Psychology, often in connections with very social and generous sequels!

I did not participate in Jaan's and the center's extensive international activities except in July 2015, when Jaan together with late Dieter Ferring, Luxembourg's University, arranged a workshop "*Structuring of dynamic borders: Topological models for life-course transition*" in Remich, Luxembourg. Perhaps it was not arranged for my sake. But that was how I felt it, although I could not fully live up to the organizers' ambitious title. In any case, I was grateful for this fine opportunity to present and discuss some of my central ideas in this forum, and I was encouraged to go on with publications on the subject (Mammen, 2017, 2019).

All these events were very fruitful, and further, some of my former colleagues from Aarhus, Copenhagen, and Roskilde Universities were also invited by Jaan and enjoyed the open and engaged spirit in Aalborg. Especially my, also retired, friend from Copenhagen Niels Engelsted, with whom I have had a close cooperation for many years, was encouraged by Jaan to publish his important book "*Catching Up with Aristotle*" (Engelsted, 2017).

The best of all this was, however, my rich *dialogues* with Jaan through the years, both "face to face," and because of my residence in Aarhus, rather distant from Aalborg, via an extensive email correspondence. The very best was Jaan's meticulous comments to nearly every draft I made for manuscripts. Here, I met a Jaan with both supporting and critical, but very constructive, comments and knowledge far beyond the frames of cultural psychology and reaching fields of natural science which were rarely touched upon in the seminars and events. With a background originally in mathematics and physics, which still is my luggage, I loved that, of course. I was also surprised with Jaan's openness and degree of agreement when I often touched upon one of the themes from our first meeting in October 2013 about bridging traditions in psychology and strengthening the bridge to natural science in a non-reductive way, but also with some critique of cultural psychology in danger of isolating itself from natural science, and as a consequence also from an integrated and unified picture of human life.

I somewhat had the impression of Jaan being the *shepherd* keeping together, expanding and breeding his herd of cultural psychology in a courageous fight against the prevailing, dominating, and reductive mainstream psychology. Jaan knew that I agreed in this endeavor but that I did not buy the full packet from reasons I will try to expand here. And in our discussions, I felt that Jaan shared many of my concerns and was attentively open to my critiques. In any case, I enjoyed in our free discussions to have the privilege also to meet the *wolf*, although a very kind and caring exemplar.

In a way, Jaan's and my discussions have been a follow-up to my presentation at that occasion in 2013, which on the other hand also was a sort of summary of the problems I had worked with for many years. The seminar was thus bridging past and future and bridging Jaan's and my perspectives on the future. Therefore, I shall give a brief summary of the problems and the themes.

## 2 The Problems Behind: Schisms and Isolations

Psychology is in a permanent crisis. It is divided by, and in, two incompatible understandings of human life with incompatible frames of reference and basic concepts. One is referring to human and social sciences and one to natural sciences. This is well known, and I shall not, in this context, dwell on the roots and history of this classical schism between *Geisteswissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft* but just take it as a premise here.

I also think that the theoretical consequences with fragmentation of knowledge, division in opposing “schools” and very little genuine accumulation of knowledge beyond additive pieces of local facts and “mini-theories,” are well known. The same is difficulties in finding the place of psychology in the landscape of other sciences and the difficulties explaining to your dinner partner what psychology is about.

The practical consequences are also broadly recognized. Although in some respects being a human science, psychological praxis can’t be isolated from, e.g., psychiatric, neurological, endocrinological, or addiction problems with clear reference to biology as a natural science.

*Cultural psychology* has, in my view, not surmounted these difficulties, which was the background for my presentation and the discussion at the kitchen seminar in 2013.

Rather, cultural psychology has, in several ways, *protected* itself against the schism by turning its back to natural sciences. That was, and is still, my thesis.

One of these ways is a belief that language, signs, and other symbolic systems create or construct *meaning*, out of a nature without meaning, defining the human situation as such. One expression of that is the adoption of semiotics as fundamental conceptual system of reference for cultural psychology (Valsiner, 2014).

The problem is here that nature, in this perspective, before being “invaded” by signs is of no significant importance for understanding specific human life as studied in psychology. Nature is so to say passive and silent, or anonymous, in the creation of humans.

On this background, it is no wonder that, e.g., early infant development apparently has gone under the radar of cultural psychology. It is obvious that the infant meeting human culture and language *already* must have some *natural*, species-specific, receptive, and adaptive capacities or prerequisites, so to say to “catch” the objective order and relational structure in the world of objects and other humans, prepared for language and signs, e.g., the relation of ownership and other people’s knowledge of objects, “a common third,” volition, and intention (Tomasello, 2008). To explain this “sense for human order” by appealing to signs is circular.

This raises a more general problem about the relation between language and signs and their *referents* in the world, between facts and language, or in other words the relation of correspondence or *truth*.

Cultural psychology has had a focus on our impressing capacity for meaning construction and creative interpretations and narratives. If we look around in the present world, it seems overwhelming and without limits or constraints, and you

may ask if it is enriching or destructive. When is it valid, and when is it fake? Here, I think we get little help from cultural psychology which, as far as I can see, has no conceptual tools for “reality check.” I wonder if there at all is room for a true/false dimension in cultural psychology’s conceptual framework.

Truth is never complete but can always be expanded and supplied by new knowledge and new perspectives. But this does not invalidate the absolute distinction between true and false. You can never reach an at once true and complete description of our inexhaustible blue planet. But that does not affect the fact that “the Flat Earth Society” is simply mistaking.

This apparent ignorance of “reality checks” has of course consequences for cultural psychology’s critical potential and societal responsibility in a “post-factual” world. But it is also in risk of isolating cultural psychology from practical psychology in the degree it is cooperating with disciplines, biologically oriented or not, based on empirically informed decisions as basis for choice of investigations and interventions. They can of course also be questioned and criticized, but a critical interdisciplinary dialogue has to respect that true and false can be applied to both sides and that you should not end in an infinite interpretative game or “hermeneutic circle.”

### 3 Key Concepts with Unclear Reference or Address

When reading writings inspired by cultural psychology, and especially when attending the kitchen seminars, some concepts are met rather frequently, which seem to have some “identity defining” status or function. Examples are *irreversible time*, *holism*, *process*, and *becoming*.

From the written and spoken context, it is clear that a key intention is to communicate some *distance* to the concepts’ opposites: reversible time, atomism, static properties, and being, respectively. But this is not always explicit.

If we shall understand what is intended or being told by putting these concepts on your coat of arms, we must try to identify what they refer to or address, as well as their negatives or opposites. Who is the enemy? Here, we don’t get much help from cultural psychology which is clearly not very fond of open confrontations.

Let us take “*irreversible time*.” This refers to an understanding of time as defining an order of events which can’t be “turned round.” If you show a short movie of a vase being dropped on the floor and goes into pieces, it will probably look “realistic”: This is what could really happen. But if you run the movie backward, anybody can see that this could not happen in reality. In fact, it would be hard to find any sequence of changing events which would also appear realistic when “turned round” in time.

So where is the idea of reversible time at all coming from? Perhaps it comes from knowledge of a special *formal* property in some physical laws. The laws for electromagnetism, special and general relativity, and some laws in quantum mechanics are “time symmetric.” The same are the dynamic laws for interaction and movements of

solid bodies, the laws for “mechanics.” In contrast to the first examples are these laws, however, only *approximations* to the real events, or more precise, unrealizable *ideals* as, e.g., the “ideal pendulum.” Every *real* mechanical movement, and that includes all movements of dead and living bodies in the world, will necessarily be accompanied with some friction and heat production, which is described by thermodynamics. And the thermodynamic laws are explicit time asymmetric or time irreversible. So present-day physics does not support time reversibility of everyday events, living or not.

Also, chemistry and the “interface” between quantum mechanics and classical physics, as basis for much experimental and applied physics, are time irreversible.

In fact, I know of no branch of natural or human science which operates with reversible time.

The same can be said of *holism*, if that means acknowledgment of the fact, that systems of connected parts show some features which are not the sum of the features, which the parts would display if not connected. Chemistry is just one obvious example. In fact, I can’t imagine a field of science which denies that.

Primary interest in *process* and not in static properties is also something characterizing most, if not all, sciences. Physics and chemistry are only studying static properties as, e.g., crystalline structures, as *products* of processes, and as *informing* of the *dynamic processes* resulting in the structures.

*Becoming*, or evolution of new phenomena, is intensely studied in cosmology, geology, biological evolution, and of course in the *history* of mankind, material life, societal organization, and ideas, just to name a few fields of study.

This raises the question if these identity-defining key concepts have a special meaning in cultural psychology, compared with the general or standard meaning. If not, we need an explanation why the concepts should be *nontrivial* in cultural psychology, when they seem to be trivial in other fields of knowledge, including common sense.

The concepts clearly have some polemic touch, implicitly pointing to their opposites. But where do we find the referents or addresses of these opposites? Where is the invisible enemy? Is it real, or is it windmills with the purpose to justify the heroic fight?

I think you in science have an obligation to be concrete in polemics. Perhaps we can, however, find some targets *inside* psychology.

I guess one of the targets of the fight could be some parts of cognitive psychology trying to reduce psychology to brain processes. And I can see that the *holistic* principle could be relevant here because the reduction can be seen as an example of “the mereological fallacy” (Bennett & Hacker, 2003) as an instance of reductionism. In this case, it is the attempt to reduce the relations *between* man and the world to something going on *within* man in a *reduced* mechanistic interaction with the world. But it is hard to see if these reductionists are against holism or if they just don’t apply it consequently.

The reference to *process* and *becoming* could, as a target, have some examples from psychology of personality believing in the existence of some basic static

dimensions and properties in individual personalities. But is that necessarily an expression of negation of the importance of processes?

All in all, it seems that the key concepts are primarily communicating some *evaluating* declarations rather than carrying precise identification of opponents and thorough critical analysis. It is unclear what is expressed besides some unspecific *distancing*, building a protective and isolating wall, rather than inviting to dialogue and building bridges to neighboring fields of science, including biology and other natural science.

Such a dialogue must always build on a combination of acknowledgment of *some* common premises and of the *partial* validity of both approaches. Without that, mutual critique of possible overgeneralizations and reductionisms is pointless.

## 4 Complementarity Versus Realism

The *cultural psychology* project is closely connected to the Niels Bohr Professorate Center for Cultural Psychology, established at Aalborg University in the spring 2013, with Jaan Valsiner as a leader. That may have been a reason why it was natural to show some interest in the thinking of the Danish physicist Niels Bohr, and also in one of his key concepts, the principle of *complementarity*, which Bohr himself considered applicable not only in physics but also in, e.g., psychology (Bohr, 1958). Bohr was probably already early influenced by his cousin Edgar Rubin who became professor of psychology in Copenhagen. The concept of complementarity was developed by Bohr in the first half of the twentieth century in cooperation with, among others, Werner Heisenberg.

Here is not room for a detailed discussion of the concept and its history, only that it today is considered “controversial” and doesn’t play a dominating role in modern physics. However, the principle has been adopted to a degree in cultural psychology reflected in the title of the first volume in a series collecting lectures from the annual *Niels Bohr Lectures* held by the center: “*Cultural psychology and its future. Complementarity in a New Key*” (Wagoner et al., 2014).

The principle takes departure in some *facts* discovered in early quantum mechanics. One of them is expressed in Heisenberg’s so-called *uncertainty principle* referring to the discovery that if you, e.g., arrange a device to measure some pairs of properties with a particle, e.g., its position and its momentum (impulse), there is a necessary limit of the precision of the measures, not on each of them but on the product of the measures. If the “uncertainty interval” for measuring position is  $\Delta s$ , and the “uncertainty interval” for measuring momentum is  $\Delta p$ , the product  $\Delta s \times \Delta p$  can never be less than a certain universal constant, the Action Quantum. When one of the  $\Delta$ -intervals is small (relatively precise), the other one must be large (relatively imprecise). There is a mutual exclusion of precision.

Another example is also about arranging equipment tuned to measure features of, e.g., a stream of particles. In quantum mechanics, it was discovered that particles can both display properties bound to their moving positions (as known from bodies

in classical physics) and properties bound to some other parameters (as known from electromagnetic waves in classical physics). You can arrange the equipment to measure the “position-like” parameters or the “wavelike” parameters. But you can’t do it at once. Again, there is a relation of mutual exclusion.

Bohr’s and Heisenberg’s interpretations of these relations of mutual exclusion were very revolutionary compared with the tradition in natural sciences.

Instead of considering the measuring equipment as any other objective phenomena, they stressed that the equipment, or rather the whole experimental setting, had a special status as providing *knowledge*. You had to take in account that the setting was not an ordinary object-object relation, but a subject-object relation, and that you could not abstract from knowledge being part of the game. Already Heisenberg’s choice of the term “uncertainty,” and not, e.g., “smearing out,” is referring to lack of knowledge rather than to some objective phenomenon.

This *epistemological*, instead of the usual ontological, interpretation of situations and events in physics was early in the discussions with other physicists called the *Copenhagen Interpretation* because much of its development took place at what was later officially called the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen. But connecting the name to a specific place was probably also signaling that this interpretation already from the start was controversial.

It was not possible in these days to settle the conflict experimentally because it appeared as rather a question of general attitude toward what phenomena and observations were at all in physics, but many considered the Copenhagen Interpretation to be too “subjectivist.”

Bohr insisted that quantum mechanics had drastic epistemological consequences and that “the lesson from quantum mechanics” first of all was epistemological and told us something new about the human conditions for getting knowledge in *all* domains of science and everyday experience. He even draws conclusions about logic and the principle of contradiction.

It is always hard to say that experiments or observations finally close a discussion of this general character. There may always be some ways of defending an attitude by new interpretations. But the fact is that a lot of experimental and observational facts, not known at Bohr’s time, today has implied that the Copenhagen Interpretation is considered outdated. What Bohr and Heisenberg considered uncertainty of knowledge is now acknowledged to be real objective “smearing” out produced by the experimental setting. Objects *can* really be nonlocal, and in more positions at once, they *can* be mutually entangled at great distance without interacting causally, etc. Objective phenomena like existence of Bose-Einstein condensates, quantum computers, black hole radiation as predicted by Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose, superconductivity, and much more point very strongly in that direction, and as a consequence, that *epistemology* is *not* radically changed by appearance of quantum mechanics but has remained rather *realistic* as it is the dominating tradition in physics. That the *practical* conditions, for measuring different properties of the *same* events, may exclude each other is also not something radically new.

Cultural psychology adheres apparently to the Copenhagen Interpretation’s generalization to psychology. But it is a little striking, and perhaps misleading for the

non-informed readers, that it, without reservations, is taken as unquestioned basis in all the Niels Bohr Lecture reports in the mentioned first volume.

Bohr's not very well-founded generalizations to, e.g., psychology are also not being questioned.

To tie yourself to the concept of complementarity and its exclusion principles is an unlucky choice. We need many different perspectives on our common world and our coexistence. No single perspective is complete. But to declare mutual exclusion between perspectives is the same as, in advance, excluding common understanding, which is not only destructive to science but to our lives.

In fact, that was the theme of my presentation and the following discussion at my first "kitchen," October 29, 2013, as also reflected in its title. And I even presented a critique of complementarity by referring to examples from quantum mechanics. We should rather understand different perspectives as when the same landscape is seen or photographed from different positions. The configurations of objects as projected in the eye or the camera are different and depending of the position of the viewer. But by integrating the different "subjective" configurations, a new objective feature appears, which was not present in any of the two single perspectives: depth.

In psychology, this is known as stereoscopy, in astronomy as parallax, and in philosophy as dialectical sublation or *Aufhebung*.

We have protecting walls enough. We need more bridges.

## 5 Conclusion and the Future

There is a problematic *reductive* tendency in much contemporary academic psychology. In an attempt to be acknowledged as a "real science," concepts and methods are taken from natural science and applied in psychology *in a way* that ignores the *specificity* of human life, which on the other hand has been articulated in human sciences and the arts, and of course in thousands of years accumulated common sense and traditions.

The present dominant role of cognitivist theories, or even computer models, so-called neuroscience, and narrow genetic approaches, are expressions of this reductionist tendency in psychology.

*Cultural psychology* as a project is facing this worrying situation with the ambition of bringing the two approaches, or cultures, together because *we need both*. The humanist approach we have already in our accumulated cultural heritage, so why should we *also* have psychology if not because it adds some *new* scientific insights and some *new* possibilities for intervention in human suffering and disabilities?

And of course, we can't do with the reductionist theories alone with their obvious ignorance or "blind spots."

In this way, cultural psychology is taking up a *necessary challenge* and should be praised for that!

Both the diagnosis of the situation and the ambitions are summarized and programmatically expressed in the preface to a volume (Valsiner et al., 2016) with the committing term “*Manifesto*” in its title.

However, in the preface, the two approaches, the humanist and the natural scientific, are, unfortunately, referred to as an interest in “higher levels” and “lower levels,” respectively. These *terms* are referring to an idea of different levels within a hierarchically organized “system” and in my view a radical *narrowing* of the whole issue in question, throwing yourself in the arms of some mechanically and functionalist inspired “system thinking,” which cultural psychology, paradoxically, is trying to avoid. That Vygotsky also uses these terms is no authorization (see Mammen, 2016). But for sake of the theme of our discussion, I choose to read it as a *façon de parler* in *this* context and to take the discussion of terminology another time.

In the preface, there are expressed some integrative or synthetic conceptual frames for cultural psychology. “That system is organized at multiple levels ... Each level is simultaneously participating in the organization of adjacent levels ...” ... “Subjectivity is organized by basic, objective organizational forms.” (Valsiner et al., 2016, v). But the dominating view of relations between levels is that the higher ones are determining the lower ones.

On the publisher’s home page (Springer, 2016), a section is chosen from the preface (Valsiner et al., 2016, vi) as an introduction to the book. In the full version of the preface, which can be downloaded from the home page, two sentences in this section are emphasized with italicized words by the editors:

*Being* refers to the process of existing – through construction rather than an ontological state

and

*...psychology as science needs to start from the phenomena of higher psychological functions* and look at how their lower counterparts are reorganized from above.

Perhaps that is better than alone stressing the opposite relation of domination from beneath. The problem is that when there are many methodological considerations of using, e.g., semiotics at the higher levels, there are no hints of how the use of causality on the lower levels in any concrete way could influence or interfere with the higher levels, and I have not been able to find any examples in cultural psychological literature of concrete influence from the lower levels on the higher ones, despite this is in the center of much *applied* psychology, especially in interdisciplinary cooperation.

In contrast to the integrative declarations of principle, we are back into the two camps, protected areas or reservations, in psychology we, unfortunately, know so well.

*So what to do?* First, cultural psychology has to acknowledge that, with very few exceptions, modern natural science is not reductionist. It is psychologists uncritically importing and abusing what is often outdated science, who are the reductionists.

Next, and even more important, the concepts of “*ontological state*” and “*lower counterparts*” astonishingly seem to play the same role in the two latest citations above and de facto to be identical, not only in this programmatic preface but recurrently in cultural psychological literature and in contrast to what is “*constructed*” or defined by “*signs*.”

This dichotomy must be hard to defend philosophically, and from the perspective of psychology, it leaves out the whole *real ecology* of human life which is neither “meaningless nature” nor semiotic structures of signs. The whole reality of our historical and significant natural relations of coexistence to persons and objects, our affective bonds, and much more (Mammen, 2017, 2019) is left out. Cultural psychology simply has to *drop semiotics* as *absolute* conceptual basis. As such, it is reductionist and dichotomizing. But some of its methods may be useful in a suitable conceptual frame.

Finally, on the more practical level, interdisciplinary meetings and conferences, and serious dialogues with applied psychology, should have priority in the future rather than the present internal “networking.” After some 10 years (or more?), cultural psychology should be strong enough to dare some possible confrontations.

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**Part VIII**  
**Innovating Methodology**

# Developing Dynamic Methodologies: Jaan Valsiner's Influence on the Methodological Thinking in Cultural Psychology and Beyond



Mariann Märtsin

## 1 Introduction

Those of us working in the discipline of psychology have become accustomed to the idea that as a discipline, psychology is continuously in crisis. That is, it is characterized by the lack of conceptual consensus about its foundational concepts and uses methodological approaches that are unable to provide the kind of knowledge needed to understand the fundamentals of human psyche. Vygotsky (2004) wrote about this state of crisis in psychology almost a 100 years ago, and since then, many others have pointed to this unfortunate state of affairs and suggested pathways out of the crisis (inter alia Danziger, 1990; Ellis & Stam, 2015; Flyvberg, 2001; Parker, 2014; Zagaria et al., 2020).

Since 1980s, Jaan Valsiner has been one of those scholars who has actively participated in the discussions about psychology's future, being a passionate advocate for a psychological science that has learned from its past and has a useful and dynamic agenda for the future. For decades, he has criticized the mainstream psychology for its lack of conceptual and methodological creativity and precision and pushed his fellow psychologists to think outside the mainstream, to use their imagination and find novel ways of pursuing research that asks interesting and original questions and seeks answers to these questions in innovative ways. Over the years, Valsiner has advanced a conceptual perspective of cultural psychology that offers the kind of metaparadigmatic alternative for the discipline that has the potential to lead psychology out of its perpetual state of crisis (Toomela, 2020; Valsiner, 2007, 2014a). And while the conceptual framework he has developed has been highly influential in cultural and developmental psychology and beyond, in this short chapter, I want to focus not on his conceptual influence per se but instead consider the

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impact this conceptual development has made on the methodological thinking within the discipline of cultural psychology and in psychology more broadly.

## 2 Moving Toward Dynamic Methodologies

It is impossible to consider Valsiner's impact on the methodological thinking separately from his conceptual advancement in cultural psychology. The two are fundamentally interlinked for, as Valsiner himself has repeatedly pointed out, cultural psychology's focus on complex human meaning systems requires new dynamic methodologies that are compatible with such a conceptual framework (Valsiner, 2014b). On the one hand, while searching these methodological approaches, Valsiner has always insisted on looking toward psychology's rich history. One of his ways of pushing the boundaries of methodological thinking in cultural psychology has been to shed light on the so-called forgotten methods that allow exploring the unfolding of meaning making. In his own words, such methods include:

The introspection of the "Würzburg School" of early 20th century (Humphrey, 1951), the "Second Leipzig School's methods of *Aktualgenese* expanded into idiographic microgenesis (Abbey & Diriwächter, 2008; Diriwächter, 2009, 2012), Heinz Werner's focus on microgenesis (Wagoner, 2009), the thinking aloud methods from Otto Selz and Karl Duncker to contemporary cognitive science (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Simon, 2007), and Frederic Bartlett's method of repeated reproduction with its contemporary extension into conversational repeated reconstructions (Wagoner, 2007, 2009, 2012), and the use of microgenetic techniques in personality research (the "Lund school" of personality research of Ulf Kragh and Gudmund Smith). (Valsiner, 2014b, p. 21)

All of the methods mentioned here move away from looking solely at the outcomes of the developmental processes and instead aim to capture the change in meaning making as it unfolds. However, in one way or another, they are all directed at examining the meaning making after the event (i.e., these are reconstructive or *post-factum* methods) instead of allowing to explore meaning making that is about to happen in the future and meanings that are in the process of becoming (i.e., pre-constructive or *pre-factum* methods) (Valsiner, 2014b). Cultural psychology with its conceptual focus on future-oriented processes is in dire need of the latter kind of methods, yet these have been somewhat more difficult to rediscover or create. I will return to this issue later in this chapter. Despite this continuing need for methodological innovation, Valsiner's impact on psychology's methodological thinking through rediscovering forgotten methods and providing an intellectual home and interdisciplinary meeting place for these on the pages of *Culture and Psychology* and in the many books dedicated to methodological innovation (inter alia Abbey & Sargan, 2012; Toomela & Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner et al., 2009) cannot be underestimated.

On the other hand, Valsiner's methodological work has not only been constrained to the rediscovery and promotion of several historical methods but instead has been characterized by the development of a methodological framework that enables

cultural psychologists to utilize and create methods in a manner that is meaningful within the specific boundaries of their own unique studies. His Methodology Cycle (Valsiner, 2014b, 2017) provides a powerful general methodological frame for cultural psychology as it guides researchers' decision-making and methodological moves throughout the research process from formulating the research question to interpreting and presenting the findings. In mainstream psychology, methodology is usually understood as a recipe of how to conduct research studies. In such an approach, methods become ready-made tools collated together in a toolbox out of which the researcher can pick and choose the ones that fit with his or her study aims, current scientific fashions, or ideas about value and validity of science (Toomela, 2009). If you want to gather in-depth data about the phenomenon, choose interviews; if it is the prevalence of the phenomenon in a population that you want to understand, then survey design is the one you should be looking at; if you are interested in exploring causal relations between variables, conduct an experiment. In developing his Methodology Cycle, Valsiner moves in the opposite direction. The aim of the Methodology Cycle is to reconnect researchers, who are engaged in empirical work, to the theoretical and philosophical issues that underpin their studies. Here, methodology becomes the study of theoretical explanation or justification as to why the researchers think that their chosen methods allow answering the research questions they have formulated (Toomela, 2020). In other words, methods, in this approach, are interdependent with the general methodology. We should not look at methods in isolation but instead consider them in relation to other aspects of a research study: basic assumptions about the world, our understanding of the phenomena, our theoretical concepts, and the data collected. The relations between different elements of the cycle, namely, the relations between basic assumptions and phenomena, theory and methods construction, phenomena and methods construction, and methods and data, need to thus be carefully considered, and decisions about best ways of resolving the tensions in these relations need to be reached. Within the Methodology Cycle, some moves and decisions about methods make sense as the methods are placed in reasonable and meaningful relations with other aspects of the cycle while other moves do not and should thus be avoided (Valsiner, 2014b, 2017). It is in this sense that the methods of cultural psychology are always constructed and "each research question – based on theoretical and phenomenological considerations – leads to the construction of its own methods" (Valsiner, 2017, p. 1).

The researcher, the one who makes these methodological moves and creates productive solutions to tensions within relations, is therefore at the center of Valsiner's Methodology Cycle. Researchers in qualitative research are typically required to be self-reflective to turn the gaze that they are used to turning toward the experiences of their study participants, toward themselves, in order to become aware of their own ideas, reasons, motivations, and reactions (Berger, 2015). For Valsiner, this kind of reflection is necessary but not sufficient for solving the kinds of tensions and dilemmas that researcher encounters in the Methodology Cycle. In order to solve these, the researcher needs more than reflection – he needs intuition. He needs to combine in his way of approaching research two worlds that are ordinarily kept

apart – the world of science and the world of art: “The ways of the artist and those of the scientist meet in the middle of [the Methodology Cycle]. Both rely on the intuition – be it educated in the scientific lores or artistic in grasping the crucial features of human existence” (Valsiner, 2014b, p. 16) for it is only the researcher who has intuition that can feel his way into a phenomenon and at the same time use this intuition to create a way out of the methodological struggles he or she faces.

And so it is that Valsiner’s contribution to methodological thinking in cultural psychology is inseparable from his conceptual advancement in this field of inquiry. While his advocacy for the historical methods in psychology is highly valuable and has brought back to psychology many productive and original lines of inquiry, in my view, his influence in cultural psychology and beyond is imperative precisely because he has not limited himself to developing specific methods. Instead, he has established a methodological framework that demands the researchers to approach their entire research enterprise in an analytical and conceptual manner and through that enables them to avoid some of the mistakes that have trapped psychology in the state of crisis for so many years.

### 3 Working Within the Methodology Cycle

Valsiner’s conceptual framework, including his ideas about Methodology Cycle, have been deeply influential for my own work. As someone who was initially trained in the mainstream ways of doing psychology, I have had my fair share of struggles when working within the Methodology Cycle. In the remainder of this chapter, I will reflect on some of these struggles, building on examples from different studies that I have conducted over the years.

My first set of struggles is related to underlying assumptions – phenomena – theory relations. Working within the Methodology Cycle has pushed me to really focus on the phenomenon and to interrogate my understandings, including the common sense understandings about the phenomenon. It has meant thinking through the underlying assumptions that I use to see the world and understanding how the phenomena appear to me through the lens of those assumptions. It has also forced me to unravel my understandings about the phenomena from those related to theory in order to avoid jumping too quickly into using unhelpful and misguided theoretical concepts. The central concern of my research over the years has been to understand identity development in the lifecourse. Working within the Methodology Cycle, I have had to discipline myself to avoid theoretical foreclosures that are offered by the many theories and models within identity research and developmental psychology and reach for the phenomenological understanding when examining the processes related to identity development. What does it mean to identify with someone or something? What do people actually do when they construct identities? These questions have led me to theoretical elaborations that I have summarized in a semiotic cultural approach to identity development (Märtsin, 2019), elaborations that have been enabled by the process of solving tensions within the Methodology Cycle.

My second set of struggles has to do with the phenomena – theory – methods relations. When choosing my methods, I have had to work hard to move away from the tendency to consider the things that are doable – the methods in the toolbox that have been used before and that I could also use – and instead consider things that are actually needed in my studies. I have often felt that the two approaches don't match and have found myself knowing conceptually what is needed but being unable to create or invent the kinds of methods that I need. Nevertheless, considering the relations within Methodology Cycle has helped me, in my own view, to move in the right direction. The focus of my work has been in understanding the identity development processes, and I have built on the logic that these processes become available for examination in situations, where the persons' planned and goal-directed everyday conduct becomes interrupted and new ways of relating to self, others, and the world need to be constructed in order to continue the movement toward future life goals (Märtsin, 2019). Thus, my phenomenological and theoretical ideas have guided me toward focusing on ruptures and the following transition periods and the meaning construction that emerges during these periods. They have directed me away from the sole consideration of developmental outcomes and toward exploring the intermediate stages and forms in the process of development. In other words, they have directed me toward examining the possible trajectories that are opened up in the multifurcation points that ruptures create and that could potentially actualize but for some reason get abandoned in the process of development. In my study of young adults on the move (Märtsin, 2010), these considerations led me to a three-layered approach in trying to capture the interim meanings and emotional reactions of my study participants at different timescales: in-depth interviews conducted three times during a one-year period to capture broad themes and changes, once a month diary-type questionnaires to capture more detailed accounts of participants' experiences, and sentence-completion exercises within these monthly questionnaires to understand the micro fluctuations in their emotional states (see also Märtsin, 2012). The combination of these three layers of meaning making enabled me to reconstruct the ruptures and transitions after they had happened at times with quite significant detail. And even if they allowed me to consider meaning making after it had already occurred and not as it was unfolding toward the future, I was still able to examine the process, not solely the outcomes of the identity development.

Similar conceptual concerns about studying processes of meaning making guided also my study of women's identity development during their transition back to work after becoming mothers. In this case, these considerations led me to include arts-based methods into my data collection activities. I asked the women to create a collage that would represent them as a woman in the present moment of their development, with the help of a women's magazine and a range of arts and craft materials. I asked them to talk me through the process of their collage-making during and after the artwork was made. The method gave me many interesting and useful entrances into women's meaning making, opened up ways of exploring themes that might be hard to verbalize in a traditional interview, and importantly allowed me to explore the meanings that were represented on the paper as they were emerging.

The collage-making thus enabled me to move away from static representations of women's experiences and toward more dynamic and open narratives that are in line with my phenomenological and conceptual understanding of the identity development processes (see also Märtsin, 2018).

Finally, the third set of struggles within the Methodology Cycle that I want to mention here are related to the acknowledgment that research is not a static and linear process, where you answer certain questions and make certain decisions at crucial points in the journey and then march forward with the rationale you have created. Working within the Methodology Cycle has led me to recognize that in any research, one needs to continuously move between the different elements of the study, consider their relations, and notice and resolve the tensions that emerge within those relations. Psychological research conducted in this way thus becomes dynamic in nature with researchers needing to innovate as they go without knowing whether that innovation is going to give them the results they are looking for. And this, for me, is where the importance of researcher's intuition lies, namely, in the strength and courage to try things that have never been done before but that make sense and might work. It lies in the ability to use the uncertainty to one's own advantage and imagine possible pathways into the future toward a specific outcome that may not but might lead to desired results. And in my view, it is this kind of attitude that leads to the creation of dynamic and always evolving methodological approaches that are needed in cultural psychology and in psychology more broadly.

## 4 Where to From Here?

In this short chapter, I have sought to describe two ways Jaan Valsiner contributed to the advancement of methodological thinking in both cultural psychology specifically and in the discipline of psychology generally. Those who know Valsiner's work are familiar with its peculiar feature, namely, the lack of empirical studies that would provide the specific real-world connection and context for his theoretical theses. On the one hand, this is not surprising. For Valsiner (2014b), data is needed only at crucial bifurcation points in theory development, while the accumulation of data simply for demonstrating aspects of people's experiences that do not lead to any significant theoretical breakthroughs, but repeat in various forms the things we already know, is nonsensical and should be avoided. In light of this view, his choice of not conducting any empirical studies makes a lot of sense. On the other hand, though, while moving decisively away from conducting his own empirical studies, Valsiner continues to be critical of the methodological improvements in psychology, including cultural psychology. In particular, he has repeatedly pointed out the lack of innovative *pre-factum* methods in cultural psychology that are needed to examine the meaning making as it is emerging in the movement toward imagined future. Over the years, Valsiner has done important conceptual and methodological groundwork for the development of such methods. And so it is my hope that the current and coming generations of cultural psychologists will have the courage, creativity, and

intuition to build on this work and take the leap toward new ways of doing psychology that will lead the discipline out of its perpetual crisis.

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# Catalysis in Cultural Psychology: Its Past and Future



Zachary Beckstead

Most contemporary psychologists are aware that human beings are wonderfully complex, and even introductory psychology textbooks instruct students about the necessity of considering the systemic and layered nature of the psyche (e.g., Myers & DeWall, 2018, pp. 10–11). We are invited to consider questions such as if consumption of violent video games *causes* people (most often children) to act violently and to explore this question from different *perspectives*. More sophisticated approaches might acknowledge that many factors might be in play and frame the question of behavioral output occurring based on some stimuli or input in terms of the probability of it occurring. Yet acknowledging *that* psychological phenomena can be studied from different complimentary systemic perspectives does not address *how* these systems are organized, mutually linked, and transforming. Gestures toward complexity, therefore, are given without any theoretical development and, thus, psychology is still ultimately rooted in casual models that are simplistic and reductionistic (Slife & Williams, 1995). To put it briefly, theories in psychology are thin, and methods are viewed as tools to be drawn from a “toolkit” and applied to phenomena without much consideration for their fit.

Cultural psychology, as a general approach, and in the work of Jaan Valsiner particularly, does not shy away from the complexity of human experience and social reality. Far from taking sides between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaft*, Valsiner has sought to reunite these traditions through a focus on the artistic, poetic, and deeply subjective field of meanings and experiences and the generation of highly abstract and general knowledge (Valsiner, 2014a). Valsiner explicitly links together the rich lived experience and multifaceted environments of human beings and theoretical developments that can account for the variability of complex phenomena. Instead of producing more data, Valsiner has constantly called for

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theoretical elaboration through rich and relevant phenomena based in the artistic, theatrical, and religious productions and the social institutions human beings create (Valsiner, 2014a; Valsiner, 2019). Critically, theoretical development requires more than the important task of describing complex systems and unpacking the parts of the whole but making the further step of "...addressing the issue of how to reconstruct the abstract generalized whole" (Valsiner, 2014b, p. 147).

This contribution has two objectives. The first is to revisit the concept of catalysis and its incorporation into the field of cultural psychology. Valsiner (2000, p. 75–76) first proposed the potential epistemological role that catalysis could play to gain deeper insight into how systems at different levels of hierarchical organization (i.e., biological, psychological, social) develop and are transformed. These ideas were further elaborated by Kenneth Cabell and Valsiner in their edited volume, *The Catalyzing Mind: Beyond Models of Causality* (Cabell & Valsiner, 2014). Along with colleagues, Valsiner and Cabell brought the catalytic model fully into semiotic cultural psychology and explored its implications and limitations as well as applications. How has this model developed, and what is its status in contemporary cultural psychology? Second, I want to address how catalysis might still yet be developed. This leads me to the proposal that catalytic models of causality can be productively linked with notions of liminality by examining extraordinary events in everyday life contexts. Exploration of three *blackouts* occurring in New York City may provide sufficient context to discuss, assess, and briefly elaborate catalysis and the catalytic models in cultural psychology.

## 1 What and Why of Catalysis

Valsiner has been critical of mainstream psychology's theoretical stagnation, methodological simplification, and unyielding attachment to statistics (Valsiner, 2014d). While psychologists' self-presentation emphasizes the "fact" that psychology is scientific (and a hard science too!), psychology has failed to develop as a science with abstract and generalized knowledge. These failures are often masked by psychology's claims of social relevance measured by indices such as the popularity of the field in academia, the symbolic presence of psychologists in the media landscape, and the sheer quantity of "high-impact" articles (predominantly empirical) that are published each year. Valsiner (2014c) points out that psychology is in an analogous position to that of chemistry during the 1800s with its link with alchemy (Valsiner, 2014c). What allowed chemistry to progress and not psychology? According to Valsiner, the most significant difference was the "...adoption of different models of causality" (ibid, p. 19). Where psychology maintained its reliance on linear cause and effect models of causality, chemistry instead developed and adopted catalytic models to understand the chemical reactions and transformation of substances via synthesis.

Catalytic models were developed in chemistry and then biology prior to their relatively recent incorporation into cultural psychology. Catalysis was and is

primarily viewed as the process through which chemical reactions could be accelerated. These substances lower the activation levels necessary for new molecular compounds to form without being consumed in this process. Valsiner offers a more thorough and richer description of catalysis:

The process of synthesizing two separate substrates (A, B) into a new compound (AB) is made possible through a catalyst (C) which temporarily binds to the input substrates—first to A (arriving at intermediate compound CA), then to B (arriving at intermediate compound CAB, binding A and B into one whole). The catalyst then releases the newly synthesized compound AB and recreates itself (C). Without the binding role of the catalyst the synthesis need not be possible; the direct, unmediated synthesis  $\{A + B \rightarrow AB\}$  cannot proceed. (p. 373)

Catalysis is the process through which new wholes are created and therefore is much more than the impetus for inevitable though faster transformation. Catalysis is a form of systemic causality that could be utilized to understand psychological change and transformation. Valsiner emphasizes the link between chemical reactions and psychology through the connection with microgenetic processes that involve the emergence and disappearance of intermediary gestalts once the final form is assembled (p. 25). Valsiner developed catalysis through his systematic model of causality (see below) and by integrating it into his model of internalization and externalization.

Further development of catalysis in cultural psychology occurred with Kenneth Cabell and his work distinction between semiotic regulators and catalyzers. For Cabell (2011), semiotic catalysts provide necessary though not sufficient conditions for the “production of novel meanings” and “regulation of meanings” through activation processes. This model is not a causal model in the traditional linear sense since catalysts are conceived as “helpers” and “mediators” that make transformations of phenomena possible. This framework draws on Valsiner’s notions of *systemic transformational causality*. Briefly, systemic transformational causality charts the ways that parts that are present yet separate might be temporarily assembled and synthesized into new forms. Cabell provides the example of how guns are widely available and coexist with students and schools without necessarily leading to school shootings. There must be a catalyst that synthesizes the parts into the novel phenomenon of *school shooting* (Cabell, 2011, p. 8). This is a short and simplified narrative of the emergence of catalysis in psychology; however, my view is that catalysis achieved significant value in cultural psychology as reflected in the production of a volume in 2014 dedicated to the topic with many contributors.

## 2 Status of Catalysis in Cultural Psychology

Developing promising ideas is a difficult task. Scholarly and other academic responsibilities in the lives of thinkers; publication outlets to disseminate ideas, venues, and contexts to share and discuss; and institutional focus on hyper-empiricism ideas each operate as constraints for the elaboration of theoretical and epistemological

novelty. Evaluating the productivity and potential of new ideas is also difficult because their trajectory is not linear; there may be limitations inherent in the concept, or ideas may be lost due to new fashions and trends in psychology (Valsiner, 2012). While there are significant issues with counting citations as an index of the status and productivity of catalysis in the field of cultural psychology, they do provide us with some minimal though illuminating information. What then can we discover about the status of catalysis in cultural psychology?

My exploration is cursory and certainly provisional. I restricted my search to the cultural psychology's flagship journal, *Culture & Psychology*, since it would make sense that any development of catalysis would be manifested there. I also divided my search between 1995 and 2013 corresponding to the "birth" of the journal and the year prior to the publication of Cabell and Valsiner's volume on catalysis and then between 2014 and 2020. This should at least give us a crude<sup>1</sup> idea of the trajectory of this idea in cultural psychology. Search results using "catalysis," "catalyst," and "catalyzing" yields 20 unique results between 1995 and 2013 and 33 unique results between 2013 and 2014. This simply demonstrates that notions of catalysis are still being utilized in some fashion, and the frequency of use increased after 2014. How is catalysis being used? In general, the notion of catalyst or catalysis are used in the context of empirical phenomena and employed as an alternative to causal statements or claims, i.e., "illness as a catalyst" (Mazur, 2017), "the role of spirituality as a catalyst of beneficial effects on the old person's conditions" (Manuti et al., 2016, p. 7), and the material organization of landscape as a "catalyst for the escalation of feeling" (Beckstead, 2016, p. 41). Yet, engagement with the basic premises and development beyond the model that Valsiner constructed in the 2000s and then later in collaboration with colleagues seems to be minimal (see Carriere, 2013, for an exception).

### 3 Critiques of Catalysis in Cultural Psychology

The paucity of theoretical engagement in cultural psychology with models of catalysis is problematic in part because we may treat the model as if it is a finished product ready for use. Toomela (2014) offered what I believe is one of the most insightful and constructive critique of the catalytic model developed in semiotic cultural psychology. His argument was essentially twofold. First, although he found that the catalytic model proposed by Valsiner and colleagues was an advancement beyond linear cause and effect models, it has been hampered by imprecise and vague terms, particularly the use of "system" (pp. 278–281). What constitutes a system as a whole and how it "...interacts with conditions, contexts, catalysts, regulators, mediators..." is unclear (Toomela, 2014, p. 279). Second, he posits that the

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<sup>1</sup> Many scholars who publish in the field of cultural psychology contribute to other journals, books, and book chapters. I did search through the catalogue *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* and found similar patterns though fewer references to catalysts or catalysis. I acknowledge that I have missed other references to and elaborations of these ideas in other publication venues.

use of catalysis in cultural psychology is not so different from efficient causal models and that “activation,” “guiding,” and “helping” are more palatable labels for a “cause” that has an effect on some kind of relationship (p. 287).

In contrast, Toomela provides an alternative framework for linking systemic models of causality with catalysis. His *structural-systemic causality theory* (SSCT) is similar to what the cultural psychological approach previously developed, what he labels *catalytic causality theory* (CCT). This approach is amenable to the notion of catalysis but avoids the two limitations described above. He further explains the role catalysts in the SSCT approach:

The concept of catalysis should also be not be related to terms like “help” or “directing,” which just hide the structural-systemic essence of catalytic processes. There is no need to create theoretical talk of “context,” “condition,” or “mediator.” There are just systems that are situated among other systems which either are or are not characterized by qualities that come into relationship with a given system. “Catalysis” is a very useful concept here that helps us to understand the dynamics of systemic changes and refers to the fact that occasionally higher-order wholes can emerge only in a chain of systemic reorganizations where some elements need to be dissociated from other systems before their synthesis into some other system becomes possible. (ibid, p. 290)

The importance of Toomela’s critique and framework is that it provides an alternative that introduces tension and uncertainty into the system of the theoretical development of catalysis. This helps cultural psychologists to recognize the strengths and limitations of catalytic models and to continue to modify and go beyond current models. As mentioned above, systemic models of causality involving catalysis are not finished products and there is plenty of work to do. The following section is an attempt to engage theoretically with catalysis through an rare events that occur in ordinary life contexts. The objective of this section is to link notions of catalysis and liminality together.

## 4 Exploring Catalysis Through Blackouts

On July 12, 1977, a late evening storm passed through New York, and multiple lightning strikes hit three separate power stations in the greater New York City area. Operators for the power company Con Edison were unable to manage the multiple failures, and nearly 1 hour after the initial strike, the power in New York City went out, transforming the light-saturated city into darkness. More than nine million people were without power for up to 24 hours. The immediate consequences were that thousands of individuals had to be rescued from elevators, evacuated from elevators, and find their way back home in darkness. What is more, during this interval, individuals began to force their way into locked grocery, appliance, and furniture stores, car dealerships, and other businesses and take away in mass food, televisions, jewelry, couches, and refrigerators, among other items. Time magazine (1977) described these acts as escalating into an “orgy of looting” (p 2, par. 2). Further destructive acts included individuals setting fire to more than 1000 buildings. By the time power

was restored, thousands of buildings had been looted or set on fire and around 4000 individuals had been arrested.

This blackout, as many social commentaries highlighted at the time of stood in stark contrast to the blackouts of 1965 and 2003. In 1965, power throughout the northeastern region of the United States and Canada was due to a failure emanating from a power station in Queenstown, Ontario, near Niagara Falls. According to the report from the Northeast Power Coordinating Council (NPCC), the transmission lines in Ontario were overloaded due to the increased energy consumption on a cold November day, and the protective relays that were designed to mitigate this increase in power tripped the station in Ontario and caused other interconnected stations to fail. In New York City, instead of the “orgy of looting,”

the sidewalks were brimming with people -- and there was a spirit of camaraderie in the air. It was New York at its best -- showing a spirit of survival, of innovation. (Pressman, 2011, par. 8)

Similarly, the blackout in New York City in 2003 was also marked by relative calm amidst the breakdown of a critical infrastructure. This blackout happened in the summer, like the 1977 blackout, and affected the wider northeast region, as was the case with the 1965 blackout. However, this event was the result of another complex set of occurrences beginning with trees touching power lines in Ohio and amplified by human error and a software bug in the alarm system of FirstEnergy Corp. The power failure radiated from the Midwest to the regions in the northeastern United States and Canada. Hitting New York City at 4:10 EDT, the transportation system was brought to a stop as workers were beginning to take buses and trains back home. Reports after the blackout indicated that while hospital admissions went up, widespread looting, vandalism, and arson did not occur. Indeed, police reported fewer arrests that blackout period compared to the same timeframe the year before. One person observed that there was a convivial atmosphere throughout the city as people were playing music and “dancing in the street” (Fertig, 2013).

All three blackout events represent complex social phenomena that generate numerous interesting observations and questions. On the one hand, these blackouts reveal our modern-day reliance on electricity to enable basic social and personal activities, from connecting to the Internet to moving through dense living spaces. Cities are not entities but processes of almost unceasing movement and interconnection. Artificial illumination is a taken-for-granted facet of our everyday lives, and its extended absence impedes our routine activities. Relatedly, these blackouts are each rare and complex happenings that unfold in time and become reflected upon in personal and collective memory practices. The 1977 blackout immediately evoked the memory of the *relatively* peaceful and harmonious 1965. Social representations are generated to frame the latter as reflecting the “resiliency of the city” and the latter as the decline of a “changed city” (Time, 1977). Moral framings come to the foreground of these events as human beings seek to make sense of what occurred. Furthermore, people experience blackouts and construct meaning out of these experiences, acting in relation to an ambiguous situation. We are still left with the question of why similar events have such drastically different outcomes. What *caused*

the spasms of violence and destruction during one blackout and not the other two blackouts?

Explanations of these events certainly requires contextualization. Each blackout can be situated within different historical periods related to mobility patterns of residents in cities (e.g., “white flight” from urban areas during the 1970s and 1980s), overall economic prosperity (or lack thereof), and other social events (e.g., 2003 blackout occurred 2 years after the terror attack of 9/11). A full contextual grounding is beyond the scope of this brief paper, but most analyses of the 1977 blackout point to a myriad of unique characteristics of that summer in NYC involving a deepening financial crisis, a heat wave in July, and widespread anxiety provoked by the Son of Sam murders during the time period. These observations certainly point to some key “critical factors”; however, they fail to adequately reach beyond our commonsense notions and explain the outcomes and, more importantly, account for the intermediary processes that emerged during these events. Understanding explaining these events calls for a systemic approach, and models of catalysis might be valuable in charting out how similar events result in quite different outcomes. Furthermore, they draw our attention to the intermediary processes that occur between initial and final states of a phenomenon.

## 5 Blackouts as a Catalyst?

Systemic models of causality involving catalysis would point us toward analyzing the elements/parts that constitute the whole and distinguishing the process through which a higher-order whole emerges. Valsiner’s model of systemic transformational causality would have us articulate the parts of the causal system that are present. Cities are complex wholes that are constituted by parts such as individuals in various social roles, social institutions (e.g., police, religious, governmental), gas and electrical systems, transportation networks, economic institutions, material objects, and meaning systems (i.e., semiosphere). For Toomela (2014), these parts are “systems that are situated among other systems...” (p. 290). The critical part is that the relationship between these parts/systems can be transformed or assembled into new higher-order relationships. The blackout in each case catalyzed or reassembled different wholes – looting in one case and a “spirit of comradery” or a festival-like atmosphere in the other cases. We, of course, cannot say that the blackout caused the looting since there is no straight line from blackout to the new whole that emerges. Even a basic knowledge of the situations in each blackout case illustrates that the initial conditions were different in many respects. Still, as Valsiner and Toomela contend that the notion of systemic models of causality involving catalysis emphasizes the intermediary gestalts and processes in the development of the higher-order whole. This is why I believe it is helpful to draw on the concept of liminality to illuminate the intermediary steps and dynamics before the new whole emerges.

## 6 Liminality and Catalysis

Let us look at the concept of liminality. Traced back to the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1909), liminality is the middle phase of a *rite of passage*. Van Gennep understood these rites to mark critical transitions of states or statuses, such as transitions from child to adult, single to married, and living to dead. Van Gennep posited three sequential ritual movements involved in rites of passage: separation, liminality, and reincorporation. Liminality is the “threshold” between the worlds and deals with transitions between states and statuses. Victor Turner expanded upon this concept and argued “...that liminality is not only *transition* but also potentiality, not only a ‘going to be’ but also ‘what may be’ (Turner & Turner, 1978, p. 3). Paul Stenner’s theory of liminality (2017), along with Turner’s conceptualization of liminality, emphasizes the ways that the limits (i.e., normative structures, social norms, rules, conventions) of social reality are suspended during liminal events and experiences. These experiences open the possibility for the counter-positioning and inversion of social roles (e.g., reversal of status hierarchies), violation of taboos (e.g., kill vs. not kill, sexual transgressions), and therefore new ways of relating to others and other features of the environment. Liminality can include events and experiences that happen to us, e.g., natural disasters, death of a loved one, etc. (i.e., spontaneous liminality), or it can involve events and corresponding technologies to facilitate liminal experiences (i.e., devised liminality) (see Stenner, 2017, for more elaboration and how these forms of liminality are related).

That leaves us with the question of how to integrate liminality and catalysis. Liminality is largely related to our psychological movement into unknown and uncertain futures. As a transition from known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar worlds, they involve separation and dissociation from our ties to a social structure and a new binding and connections between the person and the social structures (Stenner, 2017, p. 15). Unbinding and binding occur through rites of separation and incorporation in the context of ritual as well as in other activities such as poetry, theater, books, or pilgrimages where we are temporarily *detached* from the immediate context and *transported* to new worlds only to return changed. Catalytic processes in the domain of chemistry also entail the opposite but unified processes of unbinding and binding. Molecular bonds must first be broken before new bonds can be formed. Catalysts make this possible, and the process of transformation from one molecular state to another involves many intermediary steps. This has a clear link with liminality, and liminality points to processes, practices, and technologies that create a break with normative structures of practical reality allowing for the transition and ultimately transformation into a new whole.

We could even use the example of an initiation rite and examine it as catalyst of change for a *boy* to become a *man*. Of course, no one would say that an initiation rite *caused* the boy to become a man. Yet in many societies, initiation ceremonies are employed to accomplish such a task. How so? In part, this occurs because the boy is symbolically and often physically detached or dissociated, in a transitional and ambiguous state, before emerging as an adult in relation to the group. The

initiation ceremony and the passing of the test of endurance and strength reorganize the ways that the social others relate to the boy (as if he was an adult) and how the boy relates to himself (I am an adult). Individuals and the social others are now capable of generating new meanings that feed-forward and new ways of the systems relating to each other. This relating goes beyond self-categorizations to the affective level where the *boy* (previously identified) now *feels himself to be a man*. Transitions and transformations involve the successful and largely affective passage of an individual or group from one status or state to another status or state. Thus, it would seem impossible to detach notions of catalysis from meanings and semiotics.

Likewise, blackouts are ruptures in the daily course of life that alter how systems relate to each other. The blackout might be comprehended as an allocatalytic process disrupting the power system and thus feeding forward into other systems including the self or autocatalytic processes (see Valsiner, 2008, p. 133, for an elaboration of these mutually intertwined processes). For individuals, the blackout provides a rupture where conventional limits are temporarily suspended or loosened. How one should conduct themselves is not encoded into the “lights going out,” and it would be problematic to say that the blackout “activated” looting or street dancing, but it did provide the conditions for the transformation of relationships between different systems in the city. Again, similar to the initiation rite, there is a gradual process and many intermediary steps that proceed before a higher-order whole emerges in blackouts. Interestingly, even in the 1977 blackout, there were reports that people experienced a surge of excitement prior to the emergence of looting and arson. Systemic models of causality involving catalysis attune our efforts to chart the possible paths of development that liminal events may open up and initiate.

## 7 Conclusion

Human beings and psychological phenomena are complex, yet the models of change and causation in psychology are simplistic. Valsiner has proposed an alternative to the dominant linear causal models by drawing on catalysis from chemistry and biology. He and colleagues developed this model and this brief chapter provided a check on the status of catalysis in cultural psychology. Systemic models of causality involving catalysis are vital to the theoretical growth of psychology, and it is crucial for cultural psychologists to continue to develop these models. I offered a brief and tentative sketch of how catalysis and liminality might be linked together in a productive dialogue. Blackouts can be understood as catalysts for the emergence of novel higher-order wholes (i.e., looting, social comradery) since they involve changing elements of a system, in this case the power system, that promote new possible ways of systems (i.e., individual and social systems) relating to other systems. Systemic models of causality involving catalysis can provide psychologists with innovative approaches to link together individuals, social, symbolic, and material systems and chart out how they mutually transform each other. Yet there is still much work to be done to realize the potential of catalysis in psychology.

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# The Catalytic Powers of Psychoanalytic Thought Models



Erik Stänicke and Tobias G. Lindstad

## 1 Introduction

In the preface to the *Yokohama Manifesto*, Jaan Valsiner et al. (2016, p. v) argue that the complex, subjective, meaningful, and mysterious human *Psyche* must be dealt with on its own organizational level. That is, it cannot be satisfyingly accounted for by causal mechanisms of lower levels of organization, such as physiology or genetics. We wholeheartedly agree. We also join party with him and a seemingly growing number of psychologists who have long questioned the prevalent idea that psychology should emphasize discovering direct and linear causal linkages between variables and events that can be separately manipulated in empirical experiments. The fateful predominance of this misleading idea is perhaps best exemplified by the statement of the American Psychological Association (2006, p. 274) that randomized controlled trials (RCTs), and their logical equivalents, are to be the standard for drawing causal inferences about the effects of psychotherapy. Among the pioneering arguments put forward to provide psychology with more apt alternatives (e.g., Harré & Moghaddam, 2012; Brinkmann, 2018; Smedslund, 2012), Valsiner's (2007, 2014b, 2020) seminal call for an approach of *catalysis* provides an inspirational incentive for future research exploring the human mind in its own right.

However, an aspect of this quest needs to be further clarified: Valsiner's recent statement (2020, p. 128) that catalysis ought to replace traditional causality talk leaves it open whether we should abandon *any* such talk or only abandon *traditional* ways of thinking about causality. Though Valsiner's most recent arguments seem to lean toward the former contention, we are prone to lean toward the latter. Thus, we

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do not only agree with Sætra (2020, p. 177) that catalysis does not necessarily require the abandonment of the notion of causality, but we also think that the recent advancements of *causal dispositionalism* (Mumford & Anjum, 2011; Anjum & Mumford, 2018a, 2018b) are compatible with – and may fruitfully be combined with – Valsiner’s apt call for catalysis. As such, what is wrong is not to emphasize causality but to uncritically accept traditional ideas about it. Accordingly, we have made some initial steps toward clarifying the implications of causal dispositionalism not only for psychoanalysis but also more generally for psychology, psychotherapy, and psychotherapy research (Stänicke & Lindstad, 2020; Lindstad, 2020a, 2020b). However, much work remains to be done, and the same goes for the aim of advancing accounts of human agency through models of catalytic conditions and processes. We argue that both of these projects may profit from being brought into mutually beneficial liaison. Along the way, we will also illustrate how the pragmatic validity of psychoanalytic models may be understood in light of catalysis and dispositionalism.

## 2 Psychoanalytic Thought Models

Psychoanalysis has a long history of producing strong ideas, strong in the sense of being potent of aiding therapists in their work with helping patients. The ideas typically are, as Bollas (1989) writes, “elicited by a patient.” Thus, meeting with a patient’s experience, meaning-making and style of communication, the therapist is provided with food for thought. Below, we will argue that this therapeutic situation can be understood as exemplifying the interplay between catalytic dispositions. But let us, for the moment, go back to psychoanalysis, which has developed theories based on single cases yet still with the potential of being relevant for understanding new and other patients.

Bollas (ibid.) mentions 26 notions that are in use by many therapists, such as the Oedipus complex, castration, penis envy, sibling rivalry, superego, container, mirroring and idealizing self-object, the law of the father, transitional object, death work, and potential space, to name some of them. We could make the list longer than Bollas, but the point we are making is that psychoanalysis with its long history has developed many notions that may often not be in actual use by any specific therapist, or at least only seldomly so, while other notions are used in every session. An example of a much-used concept among psychoanalysts today is the “container,” while an example of a currently seldom-used concept could be “penis envy.”

These psychoanalytic ideas are also strong in the sense of having the potential to contribute to possible explanations. For example, a therapist may suggest something like this: “Could it be that you are afraid of the meeting with your boss because you dread him humiliating you, as you have been humiliated before by your father?” The reason being today’s fright was yesterday’s threat of castration. It also aspires to be a causal explanation: Because the patient had fantasies of being threatened with castration as a child, he dreads a repetition of this in relations with authorities. Thus,

relevant causal aspects may have to do with childhood trauma, where the effect being the patient's feelings now as an adult. When reading Freud's texts, one can get the impression that he very much aimed at making such etiological explanations in psychic life.

Modern psychoanalysis seems to aspire less for explanations based on past childhood experiences than moving more toward functional descriptions of how the patient relates, thinks, feels, and desires in the here and now. An example of a modern interpretation, inspired by object-relation theory, possibly with the same patient as above, could be like this: "You seem afraid of meeting with your boss because you see him as threatening, such as you often do here with me, and that seems to be connected with your anxiety of getting in situations where you feel vulnerable and dependent on others." Even if this more modern way of interpreting does not provide an explanation based on past childhood experiences, it may be understood, hence dispositionalism, as causal and etiological: The patient may be afraid because he splits off vulnerable parts of his self, such as dependency. This notion of splitting off vulnerable parts of oneself, as well as the notion of castration anxiety, may be understood as thought models. We have argued that such thought models are practically relevant as they deal with possible scenarios. That is, they are relevant parts of psychological theories even if what they refer to are not always empirically demonstrated or may only be rarely manifested (Stänicke & Lindstad, 2020). Thought models can thus be understood as concerned with dispositions in the human being that *may* become manifest under certain conditions. In some social contexts, even the experience of penis envy may emerge. However, since we live in a specific culture of a certain time, which is very different from Freud's, this may be seldom yet not completely impossible.

Our point is not to argue against empirical research on psychoanalysis. We acknowledge that a lot of important empirical research works have been conducted on key concepts (see Andersen et al., 1995; Westen, 1999; Bornstein, 2005; Solms, 2018). This research has often made important contributions, such as providing better understanding of the mind of the infant, the importance of therapeutic alliance, the complex interaction of heredity and environment, and the effect of psychotherapy, to name just a few topics. However, we contend that empirical studies (qualitative and quantitative) are not the only possible paths to relevant evidence. For psychoanalysts, and clinical psychologists in general, we (Stänicke & Lindstad, 2020) have argued that a supplementary alternative to traditional empirical research is available in form of *abductive reasoning* (Douven, 2017). This pathway has often been described as trying to find *the best explanation* for some unexplained phenomenon by adding to and/or by modifying one's assumptions with the aim of preserving consistent thinking. Thus, it can be seen as an extension of induction in the direction of hypothesized deductions; if something is observed, but cannot be explained, thinking about a new feature could contribute to explain it. Our claim, however, has surely been inspired by Valsiner's (e.g., 2012) seminal call for giving the psychologically relevant possibility of abductive reasoning the attention it deserves.

### 3 Dispositionalism and/or Catalysis?

We share Valsiner's (2020, p. 125) concern about avoiding causal attributions that are nothing but discursive tricks that cover up the need for further analysis of how things happen (e.g., depression as a cause of feeling depressed; cf. Valsiner & Brinkmann, 2016). However, without further advancements of the arguments, we find it hard to comply with his conclusion (2020, p. 125) that discourse about causality needs to *give way to* that of catalysis. Notice that this is not because his critique of causality talk is irrelevant but because his conclusion (Valsiner & Brinkmann, 2016) that we should make causality talk disappear for taking away inapt variables-talk is exaggerated. Rather, we are eager to comply with Valsiner's (2020, p. 128) more modest statements that catalysis is needed for replacing *traditional* causality talk and that talk about causality must *take a new form* (2017, p. 16, our italics). Thus, rather than replacing causality talk, catalysis seems better characterized as *a way to enter into and having better discourses about causation* than the traditional ones. However, it is still a need to clarify what a better discourse about causation is. Accordingly, we argue that we should not only acknowledge Harré and Madden's (1975) seminal critique of predominant Humean accounts of causality but also work out the psychologically relevant implications of the recent advancements of dispositionalists accounts of causation (e.g., Mumford & Anjum, 2011; Anjum & Mumford, 2018a; Jacobs, 2017; Meincke, 2020).

Accordingly, we agree with Valsiner (2014a, p. 19) that sticking to search for linear causality has led psychology to conceptual stagnation and ignorance of alternative accounts of causality. As such, we eagerly comply with his call (2020, p. 126) for saying farewell to the "variables"-focused mindset and find new – systemic – ways of arriving at knowledge. Thus, we find his emphasis on forms of *systemic causality* (2007, p. 373), as well as his suggestion (with Cabell & Valsiner, 2014, p. 8) to focus on *causal loops* generating *mutually beneficial relations*, to be on the right track (our italics). Notice, however, that these are formulations that would make most scholars working to advance causal dispositionalism feel at home. The recent advancements of causal dispositionalism relate to the resurgent philosophical interest in understanding the relevance of dispositional properties for causality (e.g., Groff & Greco, 2013; Meincke, 2020). Such properties are also often called causal powers, and relatedly, dispositionalism has often been presented as influenced by Rom Harré's seminal efforts (with Madden 1975) to replace the Humean regularity theory of causality with an account that revivifies the notion of causal powers. Harré (e.g., 2002), however, was reluctant about the relevance of causal explanation for psychology. That is, though Harré (2016; with Moghaddam, 2012) did not find Humean accounts relevant for any science, he acknowledged the psychological relevance of *agent causality* while reserving a kind of event causality as relevant only for the neurosciences. These ideas seem similar to arguments made also by other scholars inspired by Wittgenstein and are also picked up upon by Valsiner and Brinkmann (2016). Though what is meant by agent causality seems to vary among scholars (cf. Clarke, 2013), Harré's use of the notion seems very similar to Hacker's

(2007) who has argued that human beings are agents with *causal powers* to produce effects by making and preventing something from happening. As argued also by Clarke (2013), this is hardly controversial. However, one may wonder why Valsiner and Brinkmann (2016, 84) have then stressed that we should make causality talk disappear rather than that we should acknowledge the relevance of the notion of causal powers. The relevance of this notion has long been discussed in relation to the social sciences (e.g., Groff, 2008) and with the recent advancements of dispositionalism as pertinence for medicine (Anjum et al., 2020) have already been demonstrated. These advancements seem no less relevant for psychology, and from our perspective, catalysis seems relevant for demonstrating it.

Though Hume may not himself have subscribed to any prevailing Humean account of causality, he did make them available for scrutiny. According to the so-called regularity theory, causal relations (infamously exemplified by colliding billiard balls) consist in no more than that events of one kind can be observed as regularly conjoining or following events of another kind. According to the related counterfactual difference-making account, causes are events without which their effects would not happen. On both these views, causal relations are governed neither by necessities nor by any dispositional properties, or if they were, we could simply not know. Probably the predominance of these views is also due to the continued influence of Hempel's covering law model inspired by Hume, on which scientific explanations should reveal the regular antecedent conditions, as well as the empirically discovered general laws, without which something, allegedly, would not happen (Groff, 2011).

However, as pointed out by Mumford and Anjum (2011), scientific observations of regularities that cannot be prevented by any means hardly exist. And importantly, methodological questions of how to discover causal links should not be confused with ontological questions of what causality is (cf. Anjum and Mumford, 2018b). Thus, in sharp contrast to mainstream scientific paradigm of psychology (e.g., APA, 2006), causality cannot in itself be regarded as a statistical phenomenon that ought to be clarified by RCTs. At best, differences between group averages can only indicate the existence of relevant causal relations. Thus, causal dispositionalists would agree with Harre (1999), Smedslund (2015), Brinkmann (2018), and Valsiner (2016) that the relevant information about psychological phenomena cannot be gained by trying to establish knowledge of causal covering laws, as well as their apposite emphasis on understanding agents' unique points of view. However, the assertion of Valsiner and Brinkmann (2016, p. 83) that psychological phenomena exist in conditions where *catalytic, rather than causal*, processes dominate, as well as Valsiner's (2014a, p. 113) related assertion that any human sign-regulatory system is a catalyzed, rather than a causal, system, is undue. Understanding what something means for someone is more often than not to get to know about their causally powerful properties. Thus, the problem is not that psychologists have wanted to discover causal relations but that their Humean conceptions of causality have been misleading.

Indeed, the predominant Humean perspective ignores that we must account for the possibility of causal processes that happen only once. By contrast, dispositionalism revives a *singularist* view of causality as always manifested in concrete

particular instances and as resting upon the powers of the properties involved to *produce* changes (Anjum and Mumford, 2018b). For example, whether a boy feels anxious when experiencing his parents as unpredictable depends upon how he – in that very moment – thinks of himself, the parents, and the surroundings, not on whether a statistically significant number of children experiencing their parents as unpredictable become anxious when together with their parents. And importantly, there are no unpreventable laws to be found that children having unpredictable parents necessarily become anxious, not even when together with their parents: For example, children may feel safe in the catalyzing context of their grandparents, by believing they are stronger and/or more competent than their parents, and so on. Thus, in contrast to Harré’s description of his account of causal powers as a “Theory of Natural Necessity” (with Madden, 1975), Mumford and Anjum (2011) have advanced a view of causal relations as constituted by properties that *only dispose* toward other properties as their effects. Causes may thus *only tend* toward effects that may never be manifested in any observable regularity (Anjum and Mumford, 2018a).

With Mumford and Anjum (2011), we do not deny that events can be causal, but we argue that this must be explained by causal powers at work. This argument may seem related to the abovementioned notion of event causality that Harré (with Moghaddam, 2012) finds relevant for the neurosciences. However, with Groff (2013, p. 78–9), one may wonder why there is any need for postulating two or perhaps more kinds of causality. It is not that Harré (2013) was wrong that the way the concept of causality is used in a multitude of ways, and he may also have been right that the Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblances is relevant in this regard. However, that there are a number of ways in which one thing may be said to cause another (cf. Cartwright, 2007) does not mean that causation itself must be pluralistically conceived (cf. Mumford & Anjum, p. 157–8). Thus, rather than the Humean portrayal of causation as a regular relation between two discrete events (causal variables), causal dispositionalists will conceive of causation as a process that *always* consists in *the production* of change in properties. And in this regard, causal dispositionalism seems relevant both for supporting and making several (if not all) of the points made by models of catalytic processes. For example, often these changes may reveal themselves as emergent symptoms of the respective processes, but sometimes, such processes may lead to stability when counteracting powers balance each other out. This seems related not only to Valsiner’s (2017, p. 7) apt call for a focus on *enabling and blocking conditions* of psychological phenomena but also his argument (2020, p. 127) that catalytic systems allow for emergence of new synthetic wholes. As such, causal powers may more often than not be part of catalytic sign-regulatory systems, and vastly complex feedback loops, as seminally described by Valsiner.

## 4 Psychoanalytic Thought Models Through the Lens of Dispositionalism

As Lindstad (2020a, 2020b) has argued, dispositionalism has some particular implications for psychotherapy. One is of special significance here, namely, the importance of theoretical reflection. Dispositionalism implies that there are many approaches that can provide us with knowledge of causality, and theoretical reflection is one of them. Hence, we (Stänicke & Lindstad, 2020) have argued that this is exactly what psychoanalysts – all the way back to Sigmund Freud’s early development of clinical theories and up to modern psychoanalytic research that has advanced mentalization-based therapy – have been doing; they have advanced theoretical models for clinical practice through more or less systematic abductive reasoning. Statistical evidence and more empirical data are not always needed if we can come to understand how and why causal effects may emerge by reflecting on the possible interplay between the dispositional properties of persons and their surroundings, that is, if we can already understand the mechanisms involved. Causal claims are thus best supported by theory that explains how and why causal effects are brought about (Anjum & Mumford, 2018a, 2018b).

As we mentioned in the beginning, Bollas (1989) argue that psychoanalytic theories have their source in the therapeutic situation, in the meeting of patient and therapist, and it is “elicited by a patient.” With dispositionalism, we can understand this in a more exact sense. According to dispositionalism, it is seen as significant to gather data about the singular patient’s experience; the more idiosyncratic, the better. The therapist aims for understanding causal operations in the one patient whom one is helping. If a patient is struggling with anxiety in relations to authorities, as in the example in the introduction, the therapist wants to identify and explain, in collaboration with the patient, how and why causal effects emerge here and now, that is, trying to understand how dispositional properties produce changes. Singular cases can, using this way of thinking, provide food for abductive reasoning about causal powers. This may not only be of direct interest for the clinician but may also provide a rationale for theoretical reflection on specific cases, with the aim of advancing clinically relevant theory by developing new concepts and/or by calibrating already established thought models.

## 5 Summarizing Comment for the Future

Indeed, this chapter has only touched the surface of an important fraction of Jaan Valsiner’s many-faceted efforts to capture the Psyche of the human being. There are also several aspects, both of Valsiner’s call for catalysis and of causal dispositionalism, that could not be dealt with here. However, if our proposal to work out how these two perspectives may enter into fruitful synthesis raises more questions than it answers, this is just fine as long as it may work as a catalyst for future inquiry.

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# From “I-AM” to “WE-AM” Predicates: Considering Self-Reflexivity Through a Collective “I”



Kevin R. Carriere 

It is an absolute honor to reflect on the theoretical contributions of Jaan Valsiner. In his illustrious career, Jaan has published a staggering amount of new methodological and theoretical advancements in the field of psychology. His list of publications, books, awards, and professorships is so long that it is only dwarfed by the frequent flyer miles he has accumulated, exhibiting a scholar whose work is truly interdisciplinary, intercultural, and international in scope. In his quest to rediscover the space for an individual-focused psychology, Valsiner has secured himself as the preeminent individual for the foreseeable future.

In this chapter, I reflect on one of his famous open systems – the self-reflexivity of the I-AM cycle (Valsiner, 2014a). This model exhibits the fundamental building blocks of meaning-making: stem concepts. In reviewing the cycle, I first show how it exhibits both my own understandings of the tenets of a cultural psychological framework but also the three tenets of a general psychology (Valsiner, 2020b). I provide a few expansions and points of interest, including additional stems and the methodological use of stem-based analysis. Afterward, I take the model of I-AM – of an individual generating his or her personal, singular identity – and consider what it means for a collective group (WE) to generate a singular individual’s identity (AM). I show how we can use the I-AM self-reflexivity loop to expand our understanding of presented identities toward identities generated by groups (WE-AM).

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## 1 The I-AM Cycle

The I-AM cycle is a cultural psychological model of how individuals arrive at any self-statement in order to develop their own personal identity (see Fig. 1). The self (“I”) engages in a continued self-reflection of itself at each moment, eventually building toward an understanding of oneself (“I-AM...that reflection in the mirror”). Once the “I-AM” becomes established, the individual is able to begin attaching predicates onto itself – it becomes specified. The cyclical movement of “I-AM” to “I-AM” is not a repetition but instead a dialogue of the self-in-being (Valsiner & Cabell, 2011) that sets the stage for higher-level coalitions of new self-positions (Bento, 2013). This “I-AM” is considered a building block of meaning-making – a “stem concept” (Valsiner, 2014a) that is the smallest possible unit of meaningful meaning.

### *Future Orientation, Open Systems, Individualization*

This model encapsulates what I consider to be the primary theoretical foundations of a cultural psychological framework: *future oriented, open systems, and individualization*. The self’s constant self-reflection is tied directly to the irreversibility of time, where the historical influences may direct, but do not require, the continued future-forward actions of individuals. The construction of one’s identity in a passing moment precludes the future construction and promotes some paths while suppressing others, but yet the soon-to-be-created self is entirely unique in its emergence due to the movement of time. While it may appear that generalization of psychology is

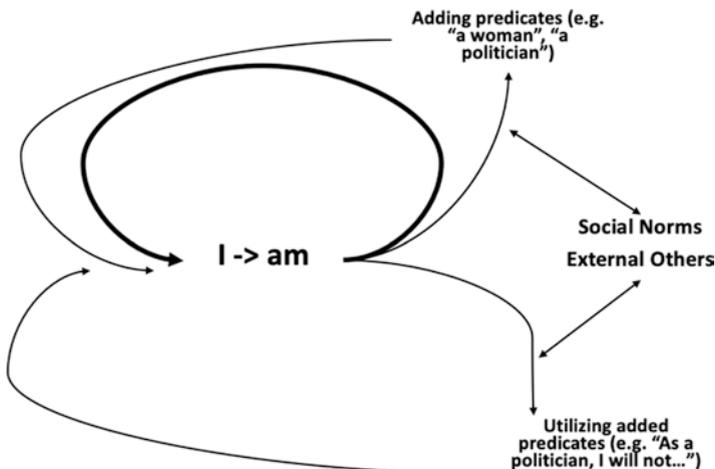


Fig. 1 The I-AM cycle. (Adapted from Valsiner, 2014a, Fig. 1.8)

crippled by such truths, such matters can be easily solved by including time within the model of psychological development.

The system provides the attachment of an infinite number of predicates, highlighting the importance of our models to be open and consider a wide range of both outputs as well as unexpected inputs. The individual may begin by saying, “I-AM...a man,” but may transition through their life to come toward the new building output of “I-AM...a woman.” This is in comparison to closed systems, where mainstream psychological research has typically been situated, where researchers may argue over whether or not *X* is a moderator or mediator of *Y*, or the impact of *X* onto a given *Y*, but rarely consider the possibility for change in *Y* becoming *Z* due to some catalytic event (Cabell & Valsiner, 2014).

Valsiner’s value of open-system methodology has been a constant presence in his writings, from early in his career (Valsiner, 1984) to the current day (Valsiner, 2020a). In each writing, the focus of an open-system methodology has always been to model the continual processes of construction of the everyday life. In open-system modeling, we aim not to create a summation of an average individual, whose average characteristics have an average impact of a certain effect size onto another reified construction of some other use of measurement. Instead, open-system modeling axiomatically takes at its core that observations of features – personality, intelligence, and even meaning itself – are characterized by variability that is interdependent on both the environmental constraints and individual agency.

The individual agency of a person in promoting variation in the system provides the critical need to turn psychology toward the focus on the individual psyche, that is, that psychology can be best understood as focused on the individual, and generalizations can best be made from a single case (Valsiner, 1986). We can look toward individual’s own meaning-making processes to observe general knowledge of psychology in the wild. This bold axiom is one of the defining features of Valsiner’s semiotic cultural psychology – that psychology is of the individual, not individuals. In his classic textbook on cultural psychology, Valsiner even defines a collective culture – typically understood as “the group” – as the process by which one “make personal culture publicly visible, as every aspect of personal reconstruction of one’s immediate life-world reflects that externalization” (Valsiner, 2000, p. 57). That is to say, collective culture exists as the individual’s externalization of their own personal culture and how they as individuals interpret the world.

Here, the I-AM cycle directs us to consider that psychology is not a group-based activity but are made of individuals, are created by individuals, and are deconstructed through individual choice and action. The individual may place themselves in a group (“I-AM...a citizen of this country”), but external influences only can direct our meaning-making toward or away from such constructions (“Though the government will not give me the passport I seek to confirm this fact”). Valsiner is unwavering in his defense of ensuring that psychology is centered on the individual person. There are many foundationally strong theoretical reasons why this line of thought is necessary, and such discussion is out of the range of this manuscript (c.f. Cornejo, 2020, for a theoretical overview of Valsiner’s approach).

Recently, Valsiner (2020b) outlined three universal principles of the human psyche and their relation to cultural psychology: *normativity*, *liminality*, and *resistance* (Wagoner & Carriere, 2020). The human psyche is individual but must negotiate itself in the place of social norms that must constantly be confronted. In doing so, the individual rests constantly in a between space – a liminal space between future and past, goals and achievements, outside and inside. In the directionality toward new liminalities, new futures, and new meanings, we find ourselves faced with resistances – of paths not chosen and of paths not yet reachable. In self-reflexivity, we can see the presence of all three.

### *Normativity*

Stem concepts such as I-AM have not been heavily expanded upon in the field. Further expansions of the I-AM cycle have been primary in considering other stem concepts of human cultural self-organization (Valsiner, 2014a), including the “I-WILL,” “I-NEED,” and “I-WANT.” In graphing out the various examples of how each of these concepts works differently, Valsiner shows how the interaction of the stem concepts ends with the emergence of a circumvention strategy (Josephs et al., 1999; Josephs & Valsiner, 1998), where affectively laden ideas (will, need, want, am) are managed in the stream of consciousness. The combination of each of these stem concepts in unique patterns, orders, and mannerisms provides the individual a complex structure of meanings to create and dismantle social norms, by either prohibiting or enforcing a given social action. Therefore, the normativity of meaning-making lies within the functioning and use of semiotic stems.

### *Liminality*

The stem concept I-NEED focuses on the individual being oriented toward an object that is not currently present. It is the individual’s first chance to consider the move from present to future – a future with such a need fulfilled. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs provides us with a clear indication of such a model, with the individual placed in a given “level” yet the need itself not sufficient for its achievement. The I-WANT concept is conceptually similar to the I-NEED predicate, with its difference being in a lack of action in its movement – it simply identifies the liminal point (“I want X” <> “I do not have X”). The stem concepts exhibit the presence of liminality – that the meaning-making of the individual constantly occurs at the border between one state and another.

## ***Resistance***

Finally, the functionality of circumvention strategies also exhibits the universal principle of *resistance* since their use is primarily that of distancing (directing) ourselves toward a new meaning. The building of stem concepts continually brings us to these various levels of liminality and betweenness.

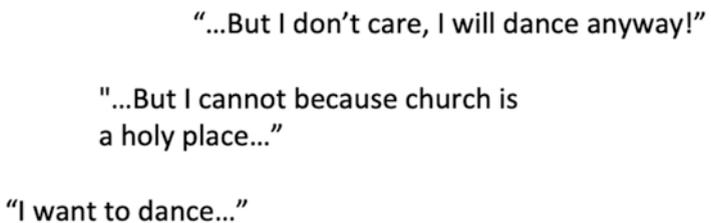
Regulators of the relationship between meaning complexes are what we call circumvention strategies; these are semiotic organizers of dialogic (and autodialogic) relations between meaning complexes. They change the “outcome” of the persons’ reasoning...regardless of whether the established meaning itself changes. (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998, p. 71)

Stem concepts are indicative of a generalized intentionality – they signal toward actions we may take or constructions we want to have. These stem concepts can help us identify semiotic mechanisms – indicators of regulative processes. These semiotic mechanisms build our semiotic hierarchies, which provides us with the ability to view the dynamics of our sign negotiation. For example, Fig. 2 shows us the basic construction and interaction of these concepts in action. The individual wants to dance but is faced with being in a holy place, such as a church. There, the mechanism of holy brings various meanings that downregulate the concept away from a given action. In the final step, the semiotic hierarchy emerges when a circumvention strategy is used to justify the dancing since they “don’t care” about the meaning of “holy.”

Circumvention strategies create the resistance needed to move past semiotic blocks (e.g., “holy place”) – to destroy or recreate a new semiotic hierarchy (“I don’t care”). This act of resistance – creating a new space to circumvent the semiotic block – can be traced through the self-reflexivity loop.

## **2 Methodological Power of Stem Concepts**

While Valsiner notes these “four basic stem concepts,” it is not explicitly stated whether or not these are the *only* stem concepts that exist in human cultural self-organization. For example, the I-WISH concept is also focused on the move from the present toward the future. Yet unlike I-NEED or I-WANT, I-WISH rejects the



**Fig. 2** Semiotic hierarchy of stem concepts

desire for action, leaving such actions out of the hands of the individual and into the hands of spirituality, deities, and chance.

It provides the landscape for pure imaginative acts of worlds *as-if* (Veale & Andres, 2014). There is also the past-tense uses of such stems, such as the I-WAS stem, looking back to one's prior self in time and using it as a constructive bridge toward the constant future I-AMs. There are countless others that could potentially be offered as further stem concepts, including I-IMAGINE, I-BELIEVE, I-MUST, and I-KNOW, as a few examples. Likewise, we must recognize the infinite number of other stems that could emerge due to tense changes, adverbs, negations, and other additional grammatical movements that build various degrees of the stem concepts ("I sort of need").

Yet the value in these stems is not in their multiplicity – but in their root organization of the individual psyche – *basic* being the operating word in his notation of "four *basic* stem concepts" (Valsiner, 2014a, pp. 21, emphasis added). The continued concern of the future of a cultural psychology has never been its theoretical arguments – but in its methodological advancements. This has been a constant concern for Valsiner, writing and editing books (Toomela & Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner, 2017, 2020a) and articles (Branco & Valsiner, 1997; Crawford & Valsiner, 2002; Valsiner, 2014b, 2014c) on the issue. The stem concepts help break down the individual psyche toward its most basic rationale, which then can be mapped out to understand the movement of meaning construction over time.

In this way, we use stem concepts as a way to help identify the mechanisms which build out semiotic hierarchies (Valsiner, 2001, 2014a, Fig. 6.1). In doing so, the stems point us to search for actions people would and would not do and discover *why*. The stems are what Vygotsky would call the "minimal gestalt":

Psychology, as it desires to study complex wholes ... needs to change the methods of analysis into elements by the analytic method that reveals the parts of the unit [literally: breaks the whole into linked units—*metod ... analiza, ... razchleniyushego na edinitsy*]. It has to find the further undividable, surviving features that are characteristic of the given whole as a unity—units within which in mutually opposing ways these features are represented [Russian: *edinitsy, v kotorykh v protivopolozhnom vide predstavleny eti svoistva*]. (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 16, as quoted in Diriwächter & Valsiner, 2006)

While such methodological examinations of stem concepts is limited, there has been some work done in this direction in terms of *modal articulation* (De Luca Picione et al., 2018, 2019; De Luca Picione & Freda, 2016) or in an analysis of semiotic processing (Carriere, 2013). Many calls for methods that can bring these stem concepts to light have been proposed by Valsiner, including focusing on an individual-socioecological reference frame (Valsiner, 2014b), of single-episode analysis (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010), and of transforming Likert scales (Wagoner & Valsiner, 2005).

### 3 I-AM: Not So Individually Constructed?

In the past section, I reviewed the limited amount of work that discusses Valsiner’s conceptualization of stem concepts and explored a few ways that these concepts already have room for expansion – by examining other potential stem concepts beyond the presented four and the methodological room provided by breaking down the individual into its most basic units that keep within it its functional unity. In providing this review, I noted how such a concept encapsulates not only personally relevant cultural psychological tenets but even larger principles of a general psychology as espoused by Valsiner himself. The creation of an individual’s identity – how they perceive and construct their own existence – is the core of cultural psychological phenomenon.

Yet how are we truly aware of the identity of others? We trust that such constructions are individually driven (while limited by social norms) and individually decided. However, we can consider individuals whose identities are publicly constructed by a wide range of actors and whose identity is not chosen by the individual themselves. A politician hires a staff of speech writers who meticulously craft the speech they’ll give in public. The public relations team prepares a given statement that “speaks” for the company. A valedictorian’s speech is cleared by administrators and other adults before being read to their peers. We may err and misinterpret psychological phenomenon if we were to make conclusions about the individual’s I-AM cycle without having a much deeper look at the group’s influence on the presented identity – and consider much more seriously the implications of a WE in constructing the presented I.

### 4 Finding the Collective Self in Cultural Psychology

In the United States, there are 535 elected members of Congress and over 13,000 unelected staff members, with an average of 34 unelected persons to each elected person. These unelected individuals share no spotlight, receive no recognition, and get no accolades. But they are the ones who craft the policy, who write the speeches, and who rehearse the talking points and debate answers. They are the ones answering the phones, replying to emails, and meeting with stakeholders. All for the “Office of Politician Y.”

Yet it is not the staff who go on talk shows, speaks at political rallies, or give statements in front of their peers in their legislature. It is the politician’s words, the politician’s policies – regardless of the true “identity” behind the work. In the case of this politician, whose identity do we – the external individual – see? When Emmanuel Macron addresses the French people and claims “I love France,” whose identity is speaking? Is it President Macron? Is it the speech writer who wrote the words? Is it the Chief of Staff who clears the speech and forward it to Macron?

There are a few potential spaces where theoretical notions of the collective voice may already exist: in literature and in dialogical self. In what follows, I provide basic overviews of both theories and how they consider the collective self, concluding neither truly addresses the issue of a self presented by others.

### *Dialogical Notions of Collective Selves*

The notion of collective voices has been long espoused by proponents of *Dialogical Self Theory* (DST). In this way, *collective voices* are focused on the cultural milieu that may constrain or free an individual's dialogicality. In one of its seminal papers, Hermans elaborates that the collective voice is the overarching normativity that guides behavior, stating, "Cultures can be seen as *collective voices* that function as social positions in the self" (2001, p. 272, emphasis added). This has been focused beyond cultures and toward any general group interaction. The collective voice as "me-as-researcher" includes myself in the larger group of all researchers, such that my *voice* in that moment may be constrained by the mannerisms, syntaxes, and rules that should be prescribed to all researchers. This larger meaning toward identifying oneself within a position of "for the group" or "under the guise of a group membership" has been primarily examined under conditions when the speakers use "we." This could be "we-as-workers" (Kuusela et al., 2020), we-as-group (Ritella & Ligorio, 2016), or even "I-as-psychologist" (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007).

But this understanding of the collective self does not truly identify the phenomenon under examination. A political speech – while given by one individual – may be directed at a larger group (We-As-Patriots) or focus the candidate into a given social grouping (I-As-Like You). But in each, there is a secondary collective – a collective that becomes a singular construction of "The Politician" – spoken by an individual, unknown to the rest of the individuals of their multitude.

Instead, we may be better served to turn toward some recent cultural psychology of music work on homophony – a multiplicity of voices that sound as one since they have very similar trajectories (Klempe, 2018). This work comes from Bakhtin's (1984) treatise on polyphony, where the social situation is exhibiting a multitude of voices interchangeably at the same time. While the idea of implicit polyphony can help expand Dialogical Self Theory (c.f. Valsiner, 2019, p. 441), it does little to target the reduction – not expansion – of voices under investigation.

### *Literature as Collective Self*

Literature has a storied past of being interpreted through a psychological lens – with journals such as *Psychology and Literature*, numerous publications in *Culture and Psychology* (Lehmann & Brinkmann, 2020; Moghaddam, 2004; Pérez & Reizenzein, 2020), and a Niels Bohr Lecture series dedicated to analyzing the diaries of the

Mass Observation Archive (Wagoner et al., 2015). In these approaches, researchers apply psychological concepts to famous pieces of literature, making claims on what the authors intended. This places psychology in a “privileged position” as Moghaddam (2004) would say. In the same moment we are reading a text, we are making claims about the truth that the writers meant to say, without having any access or empirical evidence to substantiate these claims.

In these works, there is little separation done between the characters and the authors – their existence is fundamentally linked to the author, who imbues their own cultural meanings, understandings, and theories of human behavior into their characters through the written word. The author creates the world of the character – building their backstory, framing their goals and intentions, and shaping their actions. Yet in analyzing speeches, we diverge. There is a singular voice, and we remain in the realm of analyzing characters, failing to consider the authors behind the work. The characters, albeit real with a human body and their own psyche, perform a scripted speech, while pundits argue over the presidential tones, the proper attire worn, and the tone set by the oration. The fictionalization of backstories is encompassed in company mission statements or in politicians’ claims about their own upbringing and storied past.

While psychological research using literature has successfully understood the importance of the author within the text, there has not been a concerted effort to apply this type of thinking further. Yet there still remains important distinctions – the character is restricted directly to the author, while the figurehead still has room to deviate from the script. Moreover, it is much easier to identify the author of a book, compared to the author of a speech.

## 5 What Can Be Gained from WE-AM?

In the past section, I attempted to find other work in cultural psychology that may help explain the construction of a public-facing identity. No current theoretical discussions could reasonably explain the phenomenon at hand. Such a review must be met with the critical question of whether or not such a construction is even theoretically meaningful – that something must be gained (or lost) by its (ex)inclusion.

The theoretical advancement of the WE-AM cycle relies in moving the presence of the social others from outside of the I-AM cycle to within cycle and considering not just “external” others but the “internal” others who are creating the presented self (see Fig. 3). Instead of considering the social norms on the outside of the process, it becomes even more central to the individual’s construction as multiple selves are present in the moment to decide which predicates will be added, utilized, and destroyed in each moment.

The addition of “We” – WE-AM, WE-WANT, WE-WILL, WE-NEED – stem concepts provides us with a new type of identity, that of a constructed “we.” Still individual in nature (thus, the “am”, not “are”) – the presence of the “we” notates that the true identity of the individual is not completely of their own – its agency and

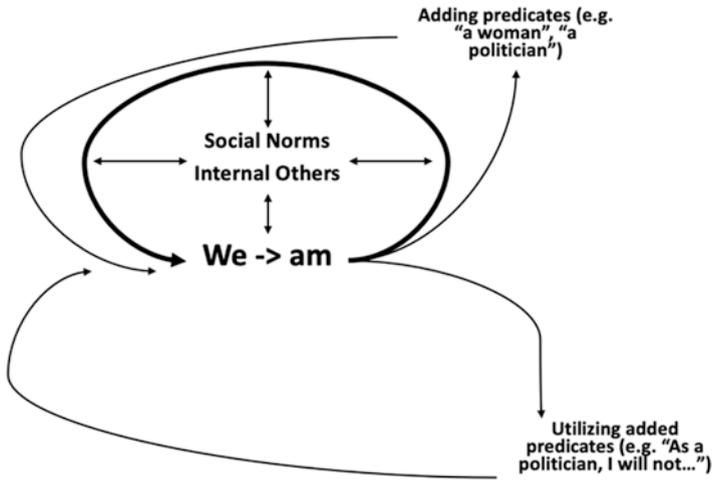


Fig. 3 The WE-AM cycle

construction have become fuzzy. The individual can only be seen in the moment when their divergence from the WE-AM cycle is made clear – such as when going off a provided script. Otherwise, the WE-AM cycle is maintained through the internal norms of what the staff *wants*, what the staff *needs*, what the staff wants the self to *be*.

Considering the expansion of I-AM toward WE-AM provides additional considerations of the voices within a given voice – in a sense, individualizing group-based voices. In examining the positioning of nation states, Mogghadam and Kavulich (2007) discuss the negotiations of rights and duties at an international level between Iran, the United States, and the United Nations. This work could be expanded to examine not only what the government says at press release level but also beyond that, examining the lead actors' own motivations, desires, wants, and needs.

A WE-AM cycle also provides the space to expand considerations of a single voice into multiple voices. Research that examines the speeches, tweets, or statements of various “figureheads” should at least be critical of itself on whether or not one is truly examining the thoughts and beliefs of any given individual but rather examining a presented pseudo-self that speaks less to the individual but toward the individual as the group wishes them to be presented (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Shane, 2018).

## 6 Conclusion

To truly cover the importance of Valsiner's work in cultural psychology is beyond the scope of this article – and most likely, beyond the scope of this book itself. Yet what we can see in looking at his work is an unwavering commitment to developing,

step-by-step, a theoretical and methodological guide to examining the individual psyche. In this short commentary, I reflected on a fragment of Valsiner’s ideas – that of self-reflexivity and the I-AM cycle – and discussed how even this small figure presents an encapsulation of his theoretical ideas. I also noted the methodological benefits of the I-AM cycle in providing stem concepts and advanced a few further elaborations that could emerge from continued work on this idea. Finally, I considered how it may be expanded if we consider a socially constructed self (figureheads) and provided some considerations for future research.

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# Jaan Valsiner in Japan: The Trajectory Equifinality Approach (TEA)



Tatsuya Sato, Tepei Tsuchimoto, Yuko Yasuda, and Aya Kido

## 1 Introduction

### *Trajectory Equifinality Approach (TEA)*

In this essay, the first author would like to join his students in celebrating Jaan's 70th birthday and present the process of developing the Trajectory Equifinality Approach (TEA) and the contributions he has made to the Japanese qualitative psychology community. TEA is a triarchic construction in cultural psychology that consists of three subcomponents, namely, Trajectory Equifinality Modeling (TEM), Historically Structured Inviting (HSI), and Three Layers Model of Genesis (TLMG) (Sato et al., 2014). Considering that the terminology related to TEA and TEM is a bit confusing, this essay considers TEA as an umbrella system that encompasses TEM, HSI, and TLMG. When written as TEM, it refers to Trajectory Equifinality Modeling, which is a modeling method of qualitative research (Fig. 1).

The first author first met Jaan on August 12, 1998, when Jaan was 47 years old, and the first author was 36 years old. The first author was visiting Clark University to conduct research on the history of psychology and investigate the footprints of Japanese psychologists in the Meiji era (1868–1912). Jaan then hosted a luncheon for the Japanese research group involved in this study (Fig. 2).

One day in the autumn of 2002, in a hallway somewhere at Ritsumeikan, the first author stopped to talk to Professor Kazuko Takagi (currently Emeritus Professor of Ritsumeikan University), who said, "We have one vacancy for a visiting professor in the Faculty of Letters for the next fiscal year. If you can prepare the necessary

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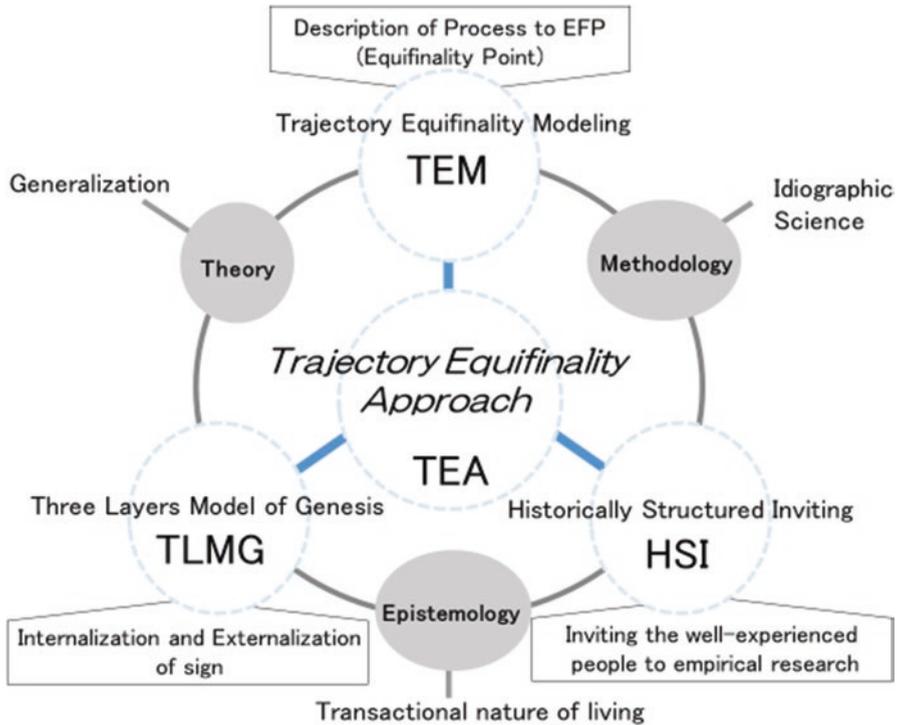


Fig. 1 Triarchic structure of the Trajectory Equifinality Approach (TEA)

paperwork in a week, you can invite some professor you like from abroad.” The first author was inspired to invite Jaan Valsiner, so he sent him an invitation email. Jaan immediately responded positively. The first author wanted to invite Jaan because of his excellent achievement in both developmental psychology and the history of psychology. Consequently, the Ritsumeikan University formally invited Jaan as a visiting professor in the fiscal year 2003. The academic exchange involving the first author, his colleagues, and students with Jaan then officially began in January 2004.

### *Struggling with Jaan’s Thoughts*

The decision to invite Jaan was finalized in early 2003. Therefore, the author and the university had to wait a year before Jaan came to Japan. While waiting, the first author and his students decided to read Jaan’s book. In addition to members of Ritsumeikan University, Professor Yoko Yamada, who was a professor at Kyoto University at the time, together with her students also joined the author in this endeavor. The book that the author read was *Comparative Study of Human Cultural Development* (Valsiner, 2001). Valsiner has indicated that in social psychological

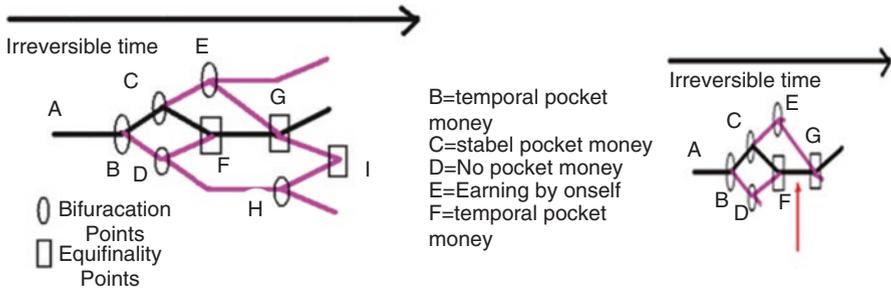


**Fig. 2** Photos from Clark University, United States (1998)

thought, the term “culture” has three meanings (Osafu, 2018). First, culture is used to describe a group of people who belong together by virtue of some shared features. This definition implies that a person belongs to the said culture. Second, culture can be described as an inherent systematic organizer of the psychological systems of individual persons. This implies that culture belongs to the person. However, for the authors, the idea that “culture belongs to the person” was very difficult to understand at that time. The third use of culture refers to the interrelatedness that exists between an individual and his environment. Therefore, culture is influenced by the way people relate with their environment.

At the time, it was difficult for Japanese psychologists to understand the notions of culture that Valsiner was exploring. It was even more difficult to understand the phrase “culture belongs to the person.” Therefore, it was an arduous task to read Valsiner’s book.

In addition to the lectures, Jaan had several other events planned for him during his visit to Japan. Therefore, in addition to his stay in Kyoto, he visited Nara, Inuyama, and Sapporo, where he met various researchers. Ritsumeikan University also organized various events for him that were not necessarily lectures. For instance, the Institute of Human Sciences of Ritsumeikan University organized the symposium “Cultural Psychology and Various Aspects of Human Relationships” on January 25, 2004, with a group of outstanding Japanese psychologists. The first author had planned to present how children begin to receive pocket money as a panelist, but he was unable to do so because he did not yet have an adequate perspective for the analysis. He attempted to analyze the following case anyway: A Korean child once received a regular allowance from her mother, but she was scolded for not managing it well, and the allowance was eventually taken away.



**Fig. 3** The diagrams of Trajectory Equifinality Modeling

However, in Korea, it is customary for one child to take turns paying for all the children when they eat their snacks. Therefore, the child needed a lump sum allowance, and she asked her mother to give her a regular allowance again. The first author initially represented this case as a timeline in one dimension, but he found this method of representation to be inadequate.

The first author did not remember exactly what happened. However, what is certain is that he looked at Jaan’s diagram of “equifinality in development” (Valsiner, 2001; Fig. 3.4; p. 62) and felt that this scheme could be used for the analysis, eventually giving it a try. This diagram was from the book that had tormented the first author and his colleagues during the process of pre-learning of Jaan’s theory. The first author finally realized that the book was worth the painstaking read. Therefore, in the symposium, the first author presented the very first TEM diagram applied on a real-field case (see Sato, 2020). In the figure below (right), child X was once at point C but has now moved to F and G (Fig. 3).

### *Aftermath of the Symposium*

Jaan was very glad to participate in the Symposium on Cultural Psychology and to learn, from the presentations, several new notions that he had not encountered before. The next day, on January 26, he appreciated the value of the symposium, noting that “The Symposium on Cultural Psychology filled its intended function to its best—to get together Japanese and visiting scholars from USA and Germany to discuss how to build new ways of studying cultural phenomena in psychology. Dr. Sato showed how the phenomenon of children asking for—and receiving or not receiving—their pocket money is crucial for linking micro-cultural negotiations with wider societal issues of value socialization of children” (Valsiner, 2004; personal communication).

A day or two after the symposium, Jaan threw an unexpected suggestion at the first author. He suggested that the first author should write a chapter of a book with him, and the book had to be in English. The first author had never thought of that. This was an opportunity for the first author and his network to become part of a larger network.

Jaan went ahead to make another suggestion to the first author again. He asked the first author to participate in the “International Congress of Psychology” (ICP) that was to be held in China later in August that year. The first author was also requested to give a talk at the symposium “The End of Methodological Colonialism in Psychology: Back from Samples to the Systemic Study of Individuals” that was organized by Jaan.

These requests were completely unexpected, but the first author gladly accepted them. This decision was a great foundation for and a major cornerstone to the development of the TEA. The data analysis and preparation of the ICP presentation with then graduate students, Yuko Yasuda (the third author) and Ayae Kido (the fourth author), clarified some of the concepts for the TEA analysis. The two former students are now university professors and the coauthors of this essay.

## 2 Theoretical Inquiry on Writing the Historically Structured Sampling (HSS) or the “Equifinality Sampling” Chapter

After Jaan’s departure from Japan, the authors’ activities on TEA were initiated by a double trajectory of theory development and data analysis. The former was carried out in the form of writing a chapter of a book, while the latter was carried out by collecting and analyzing data from the third and fourth authors. These two trajectories were complementary rather than oppositional. Theoretical developments were reflected in the data analysis, and ideas for data analysis were incorporated into the theory. Let us first look at the former, namely, writing the HSS or the “Equifinality Sampling” chapter (Valsiner & Sato, 2006).

Valsiner and Sato’s first article on TEA was “Historically Structured Sampling (HSS).” Jaan had a strong interest in criticizing the notion of “random sampling” in the social sciences. This is a bit confusing because “Historically Structured Sampling (HSS)” has now been renamed “Historically Structured Inviting (HSI),” with the word “sampling” replaced with “inviting.”

The idea of HSS (not HSI here) is simple. Sampling needs to include past life course evidence to ensure that the study of future developmental events is put into focus. However, it is a big theoretical challenge to coordinate the not-yet-known future and no-longer-experienced past happenings. Simply put, HSS is a method of sampling individual cases based on their previous (up-to-now) life course histories that are analyzed as a series of bifurcation points. It makes it possible to contrast individuals who have arrived at the present state (equifinality point) through vastly different life course trajectories (Sato et al., 2007).

TEM was the first effort to find an answer to this challenge. Originally, Jaan was going to write this chapter using the concept of “equifinality sampling.” This is because he felt that the method of random sampling was ruining psychology. Later, Zittoun and Valsiner (2016) indicated that TEM was a by-product of reconceptualizing the act of sampling in social sciences.

The notion of HSS heavily relies on the notion of equifinality, which originated in the general systems theory of Von Bertalanffy (Von Bertalanffy, 1968) and is

rooted in the early work of Hans Driesch (1908). Driesch performed a series of experiments agitating sea urchin during their early phases of cell division which caused them to fragment. Instead of forming a partial embryo, Driesch found that the cells formed an entire one. This suggests that the same final state may be reached from different initial conditions and from different initial techniques adopted. This is what Von Bertalanffy (1968) called equifinality. He regarded living organisms, including human beings, as open systems (Valsiner & Sato, 2006) and outlined the principle of equifinality as a crucial for them:

In any closed system, the final state is unequivocally determined by the initial condition, e.g., the motion in a planetary system, where the positions of the planets at a time  $t$ , is unequivocally determined by its positions at time  $t_0$ . If either the initial conditions or the process is altered, the final state will also be changed. This is not so in open systems. On the contrary, in open systems, the same final state may be reached from the initial conditions and in different ways. This is what is called equifinality, and it has a significant meaning for the phenomena of biological regulation (Von Bertalanffy, 1968; p 40).

Equifinality means that the same state may be reached from different initial conditions and in different ways adopted over the course of time. Valsiner (2001) took the notion seriously and incorporated it in his developmental theory. However, this notion was not combined with the methodology of data analysis. It is the first author's presentation of the pocket money issue at the 2004 symposium that led to a breakthrough in the semiotic cultural psychology of Jaan Valsiner.

HSS focuses on the individual events and/or states considered as equifinality points (EFP). Therefore, researchers must be able to handle any experience they want to inquire. The researchers in this study can handle any sort of experience, ranging from a major experience such as a disaster to everyday experiences such as children fighting in kindergarten. This innovative notion of sampling (first Equifinality Sampling, then Historically Structured Sampling) has greatly expanded the research field of cultural psychology and made it possible to connect with other disciplines and research fields.

Since this section has explored the new theoretical perspectives on sampling, the next section explores the development of data analysis methods.

### 3 The Development of Data Analysis Tools on TEM

The development of data analysis tools has been accompanied by several specific research developments.

The third author, Yuko Yasuda, was busy writing her master's thesis, which was due on January 31, 2004; hence, she did not have the opportunity to meet Jaan during his first visit to Japan in January 2004. However, when she was introduced to the concept of equifinality, she had a hunch that the concept would play an important role in the reanalysis of her study's data. Although she cannot articulate the reason behind the hunch, her instincts were right. She embraced the new idea, decided to reanalyze the data, and published her first article. This went down in history as the

first paper on TEA (Yasuda, 2005). The fourth author, Ayae Kido, also began to analyze the makeup behaviors of Japanese female students. Both Yasuda’s and Kido’s studies were presented at a symposium organized by the International Psychological Association in August 2004. The two authors presented their works at the symposium before publishing them.

Working with actual data has facilitated the development of many important conceptual tools of data analysis. At the time, the only methodological concepts that Yasuda and Kido could employ were bifurcation points, equifinality points, trajectories (i.e., multiple lines), and irreversible time. A bifurcation point (BFP) is a point that has alternative options to go forward from while the notion of irreversible time originates in Henri Bergson.

These two researches involved HSS. The research participants were not randomly selected; instead, they were invited to participate as people who had experience in the two research topics: These are “girls starting to use cosmetics (Kido’s study)” and “infertile wives abandoning reproductive treatments (Yasuda’s study).”

This implies that two of the early supporters of the studies employing the concept of equifinality were both female (Yasuda and Kido), and their studies explored “some female-specific phenomena” of having children and wearing makeup. Therefore, researching these topics posed a dilemma.

The idea was that when these experiences were set at an equality point, they could be perceived by women as something they “longed for” or “valued.” Generally, it is believed that, if possible, researches should avoid presenting values to society. Therefore, Sato et al. (2004), in their presentation at the ICP in Beijing, proposed the idea of polarizing experiences that are the complementary set of the equifinality point, called a “polarized equifinality point” (P-EFP). This allows the researcher to express specific phenomena and the experiences under study that are not necessarily regarded as highly valuable. More importantly, setting a P-EFP allows another dimension to be articulated relative to the dimension of time—the dimensions of EFP and P-EFP can now be articulated as distinct dimensions from time. It is worth noting that this shortcoming has been resolved, and as a result, the diversity of trajectories has become more visible (Fig. 4).

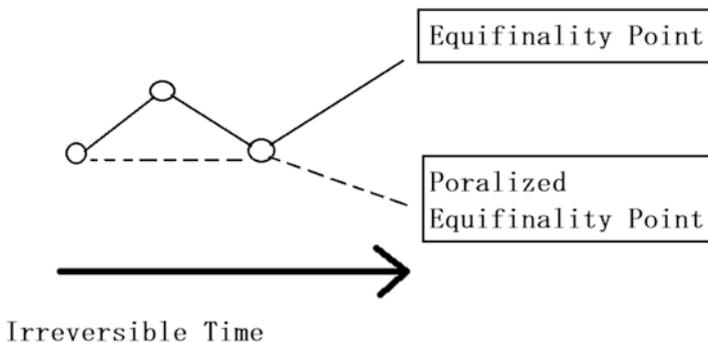


Fig. 4 Equifinality point and polarized equifinality point on the TEM diagram

Although the third author's study was originally intended to explore the process of infertility treatment, her study of people who considered adoption resulted in her studying people who stopped infertility treatment without getting pregnant. In Japan—unlike in other cultures perhaps—it is a requirement for couples to stop infertility treatment before they can adopt a child. Therefore, the decision to discontinue fertility treatment was set as an equifinality point in the TEM, and the third author tried to describe the diversity of paths leading to the equifinality point. However, even with the TEM, many people are forced to have similar experiences at some point. This was conceptualized as an obligatory passage point (OPP).

The fourth author conducted a study in which she interviewed females about their experiences of passive makeup as children to help her describe them as an OPP in the makeup experience. However, this did not go very well. Although not everyone necessarily experiences OPP, all the participants in the fourth author's study had experienced passive makeup as women during their younger days. Consequently, the study failed to represent the diversity of this experience. Another important concept that was proposed by this study was that of social force, which has a significant impact on a person's behavior, regardless of whether he/she is aware of it or not. This concept was later categorized as social guidance (SG), which is the force toward the equifinality point, and social direction (SD), which is the force that moves away from the equifinality point (Kido, 2011).

It is also important to note that the first author applied for and was accepted for an academic research grant from the Research Department of Ritsumeikan University in 2004. We are very grateful to Ritsumeikan University for recognizing the potential of the new idea that was born a few months ago, for taking this plunge of faith, and for providing the first author with a research grant. This grant has allowed us to hold regular research meetings and to cover the travel expenses of three people to the ICP in China, thus giving a great boost to our initial efforts.

#### **4 The Three Layers Model of Genesis, Understanding the Transformation Processes, and Promoter Sign and Bifurcation Point Matter**

The last piece of the triarchic system of the TEA is the TLMG. Valsiner (2007) proposed “the laminal model of internalization/externalization,” and this study describes it as the “Three Layers Model of Genesis (TLMG). He also proposed the model of “relations between ontogenesis, mesogenesis, and microgenesis (AKTUALGENESE),” as shown in Fig. 5.

The TLMG is crucial for understanding ontogenesis through the prism of two other time frames, namely, mesogenetic and micro genetic (Valsiner, 2007). At the lowest level, the micro genetic level, the process of AKTUALGENESE (this German word was translated into the English word “microgenesis” by Heinz Werner) was always activated. In the macro genetic level, as presented in the

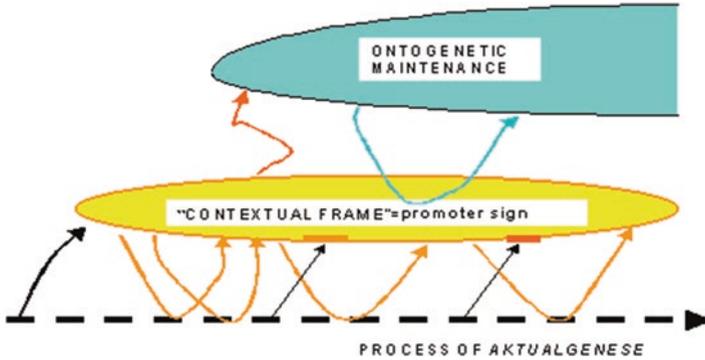


Fig. 5 The three layers model of genesis (TLMG)

ontogenetic maintenance figure, stability (not changing) is needed. It is in between the two levels—the mesogenetic level—where changes are consolidated to be either taken as novelties to the macro genetic level or become regulators (promoter sign) of the micro genetic processes (Sato et al., 2009).

If the promoter sign emerges, it means the bifurcation point (BFP) will also emerge. The process of AKTUALGENESE has a base to change. However, the ontogenetic maintenance can easily collude with the social direction (SD) derived from social norms, habits, or any conservative tendency. Under these circumstances, change never occurs. On the other hand, if social guidance (SG) has enough power to support and/or guide the promoter sign, a new trajectory from the BFP emerges. Therefore, the TLMG is related to the BFP. This implies that the TLMG is a model that captures the choice of trajectories between SD and SG at a BFP in the three layers (Tokito & Terashima, 2020).

## 5 Concluding Remarks

In Japan, TEA has not only been used extensively in psychology, but it has also been used in nursing, childcare, and Japanese language education. Recently, there has been a trend to use TEA in marketing research. Overseas colleagues, especially in Brazil, continue to conduct research using TEA (Bastos, 2017; Branco & Valério, 2021; Lyra, Valério, & Wagoner, 2018). It is interesting to note that TEA is also being used in Japan and Brazil, two countries located in opposite ends of the globe. In particular, the concept of shadow trajectory, which was proposed by Bastos (2017), is one of the achievements of TEA in Brazil. The theoretical advances, specific research, and international developments of TEA are also summarized in the book *Making of the Future*, which was published in 2016 (Sato et al., 2016).

The celebration of completing 70 years of age is called Koki in Japan. Koki originated from a famous Chinese poem by To Po, which describes how rare it is for

people to live until the age of 70. Notably, the exchange between Jaan and Japanese psychologists has been very fruitful and, together with many Japanese psychologists and cultural psychologists from around the world, we are happy to celebrate Jaan's 70th birthday.

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**Part IX**  
**Concluding Comment**

# My Confession



Jaan Valsiner

Coming into “adulthood” and trying to engage in the big social issues of the day, I’m feeling really grateful that I had the opportunity to study with people like yourself. **You and a few others taught me how to think, rather than telling me what to think.** I’m only just discovering how valuable that was.<sup>1</sup>

Birthdays never make me happy as they remind me of the future. For me, it is a moment of feeling into the external limit to the lifetime. I feel the need to hurry up with all the emerging new intellectual projects that I—most egocentrically—want to get done before vanishing into the oblivion. However, this birthday brings me the truly valuable gift—a display of a multitude of ideas that the 50 authors in this book have brought together under the pretext of this *Festschrift*. I am humbly and deeply grateful for this homage to my efforts over the years past—looking forward to the ones still ahead.

A *Festschrift* is an opportunity to see how the ideas in it go beyond those of the person who is being honored for the survival to the given symbolic age. It shows the innovations beyond the innovator. It is precisely the freedom to think “outside a box” that characterizes people who have collaborated with me over the years. And this I appreciate most—both poetically and pragmatically. The smell of coffee, of newly published books, and of run-down brothels provides me the ambience for playing with highly abstract and seemingly useless ideas that my two fingers dance on the laptop keyboard to engrave them into yet another barely readable text.

Indeed, my texts make hard reading. I do not write for the “lay public” trying to entertain them or prove my public image of any kind. I rather hide myself from that wide public—making it hard to reach the ideas that are hidden behind my often-concentrated phrases or images and published in places far from the places where

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<sup>1</sup>Gregory Minikes, personal communication, July, 5, 2018, emphasis added. Greg was my undergraduate advisee at Clark, worked in our research group but without much scientific results, and then found his way in real life outside of academia. I find his expression of gratitude very precise to my educational credo.

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they could get instant attention by the scavengers—journalists who look for prey. Every time I now get e-mail messages “congratulations on your N-th citation,” I feel distant—why should they tell me that? The fascination with citation counts and “H-indexes” passes me by as irrelevant for what I do. If they want to play “fame games,” they are welcome to do so—but it does not have an impact on what I am doing. I move from one difficult problem to the next—feeling my basic inability to solve them and happiness when I suddenly feel I might have made a small step forward, only to find out soon later that it was not the case.

I am writing—rather than speaking. Lecturing is not one of my pleasures—even if I manage, and sometimes maybe even well. In my writings, I am building up a polyphonic texture of ideas. Each text has three interwoven layers. There is the obvious written text that strives toward description of phenomena and increasingly exiles the references from the main text to the footnotes. These references are just not needed in the text that should flow, triggering the feelings of the reader leading to serious contemplation. Most references we see in psychology texts are general enough to be trivial (e.g., “Valsiner claims that human mind is social”). I try to avoid such trivial references. When I read others’ texts, I instantly “jump over” any sequences of in-text author (year) references—these are mostly hiding the author’s ideas (if these exist, of course) rather than helping the reader to understand. Of course, these references create “citation capital” for one’s friends, but I hope we do not publish for this as our main goal. Publishing is public sharing of ideas—not making of social countable commodities called “publications.”

More importantly, the text in my writing is only meant to support my main messages—which are in the figures I have been drawing and inserting. They are supposed to carry the new contributions that I might claim. The move from text to figures is, in my case, the reverse of the usual (where figures illustrate text)—I use text to illustrate figures. Pleromatization is central!

Finally, the third thread in this woven fabric are the artful inserts—they create the context for the other two and are often allegorical. Their sequence in a longer text—a book—includes a hidden story of their own, told through the hyper-generalized ideas felt in when exploring the images. This interweaving of three threads makes my texts a complex reading task. But that is as life is, anyway. I am not in for simple “how to do it” advices. Rather, it is the general map of different possibilities of how to think that I try to chart out.

Yet there is resistance. Over the past few decades, I encounter a question from my students in many corners of the world—“*Can we think this way?*” This is sadly symptomatic of where our higher education is moving—from innovative play with ideas to manualized application of accepted ways of thinking and doing science by standard treatment schemes. I feel like a living fossil trying to explain that the assumption—somebody or some institution sets the stage for “the right ways” to think—is blatantly inhumane, socially dangerous, and stupefying for any science. Of course, I fail—the “Bologna system” that consensually drives our higher education wins. Certificates of academic degrees replace the pleasure of thinking, time limits set the frame for obtaining the certificates, and innovative thinking is lost in between.

There is more at stake here—more than mere innocent questions asked by students. We can trace a very clever societal tactic to make social sciences into “normal science” in the sense of Thomas Kuhn: provide limited funding so that more funding needs to be sought, and make getting it highly competitive (e.g., the proud announcements that 90% rejection rate in grant applications is a sign of quality rather than that of waste of work hours by the unsuccessful applicants), and with the “peer review” system, let the socially approvable ideas get the limited funds. Innovation just cannot emerge in such setup. “Scientific revolutions” are not expected to happen when scholars master the rhetoric techniques of grant writing.

However, innovation does exist—and the ideas expressed in this book clearly indicate that. They come from all over the world—as the coverage in this book nicely shows. European and North American universities no longer have a monopoly on new ideas. It is now a worldwide privilege—which this book in my honor amply demonstrates. Yet it does not proceed far enough. In the years I have spent in universities—starting from my own student years in Tartu in the 1970s—I have been promoting the development of new ideas among the youngest of the students. I have been telling my undergraduates in American universities, “*You can create very innovative perspectives because nobody takes you seriously.*” It is a rather damaging comment on the realities of contemporary higher education—but I am afraid it is appropriate. A number of the contributors to the present book may remember my trust in their abilities to go beyond the social demands in their young years. The new way of creating student researchers’ international tandems—the profoundly productive idea that Luca Tateo and Pina Marsico introduced—is clearly the promising move for the future.

Of course, such belief in the powers of the young—and of the old who manage to keep the youthful energy and optimism in solving important problems of self and society—is deeply rooted in my own constructive arrogance of my student years. Three years (of the five) in my studies completely devoted to self-study through research (even if very naïve research at the time) set me up in the belief that young students—if their curricula afford some freedom for thought—can accomplish major tasks in our social sciences. Here we are in a way lucky—breakthroughs in psychology can happen first in the theoretical side rather than through empirical accumulation of what is usually called “the data.” Like mathematicians, psychologists need to trust their minds (and souls) first—but this is *not* the message they get in their formal curricula. Rather the other way around.

What are the ideas I could take credit for trying to bring them into psychology from other disciplines and inventing some myself? Over decades, I have been convinced that the reality of irreversible time is the most crucial starting point for all psychology. The focus on it in philosophy (Henri Bergson) and in physical chemistry (Ilya Prigogine) seems sufficient preparatory work for bringing them into the very core of psychology. Yet it is not there—the implications of the idea are

horrifying and would call for full rethinking of the empirical methodology.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, replacing the notion of causality by catalysis is one of my theoretical borrowings from chemistry where it is developed since 1830s, again a solid foundational idea of over a century history but absent in psychology. As I look at the situation in psychology today, I have failed in these transfers. So much for “interdisciplinarity” in psychology! A nice word but no substance.

What about my own inventions? I have introduced the notions of *pleromatization* and *hyper-generalization*—both in dialogue with cognitive and developmental science. Pleromatization finds its roots in art history—in the detailed overcrowdedness of Renaissance paintings that went in their meaning-making far beyond the already-rich reality. They were complex signs painted in the form of seemingly realistic images of persons in rich landscapes. Alpine-looking backgrounds for typical Netherlandish village or town images in the foreground were frequent in the conventions of painting. The art suggested the deep connection of the “near” and the “far”—but psychology has yet to understand it.

Bringing in ideas from art history leads us in psychology to appreciate the centrality of the affective beginnings of psychological phenomena—from sensations onward. Pleromatization is thus a process of affective generalization—happening through field-like signs and in parallel to the well-known schematization (category formation through abstraction). The difference is in the abstracting vagueness of pleromatization—the feeling of generalization arises in terms of a sign field that is approximate rather than expressed in a fixed concept. “*This feels somehow like silence before a storm*” in contrast to “*this is silence*” is the contrast between pleromatization and schematization—both still expressed in verbal means. The similes and metaphors—followed by silent *Einführung* of intuitive understanding that cannot be anymore verbally expressed—are the ways of pleromatic generalization.

Finally, the generalization process proceeds beyond schematic and pleromatic abstractions—to the unity of both that I have labelled *hyper-generalization*. This is the state of the *psyche*—call it “mind” or “soul” at your pleasure or scientific convictions—that is characterized by the subjective feeling of overwhelming and affectively meaningful relationship to some aspect of the world. Our human ways of living are built on the basis of such—unverbalizable—overwhelming affective sign fields. Our passions and intentions are built up with the help of these fields.

Can I say I have been living with a hyper-generalized passion for psychology? Interestingly, the answer is “no”—psychology has been just a field where important human phenomena are expressed—and usually missed by the existing practices of psychological science. I find it epistemologically interesting to study that discrepancy—how could psychological science over the last two centuries go so deeply

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<sup>2</sup>For instance, the implication here is that any psychological phenomenon occurring within its duration is unique, and no sameness categories can be established. This makes data accumulation—and all the established data analysis tools—impossible to apply. Instead, one needs to investigate the universality in the single instant—much like astrophysicists do in their studies. The investigation of planet Mars is a single case of universal implications to the understanding the whole of the universe.

wrong so as to consider the human being to be equivalent to a white rat or a computer, the latter built by the humans themselves. This explains my recurrent efforts to make sense of lonely creators of novelty in the history of psychology—James Mark Baldwin, Lev Vygotsky, Heinz Werner, and, nowadays, Carl Gustav Carus. They were all deep thinkers who tried to innovate psychology of their times. All of them failed—even if they did point out paths for the future. Yet the admiring followers have been ready to praise the “giants on whose shoulders we stand” and—in the middle of that praise—not proceed further on these paths. Becoming a “classic” in psychology means the death of the unfinished but potent ideas, so my accounts of history of psychology are analyses of the sincere efforts to develop ideas by passionate original thinkers hindered by the circumstances of ordinary life—illnesses, inflations, wars, and so on.

So in sum, I am not a psychologist but an epistemologist by personal convictions. I carry with me—in an act of proculturation (the important innovation that Lado Gamsakhurdia has brought into cultural psychology)—a synthesis of my Estonian roots, Soviet-era education, the courage to escape from the Soviet empire, and diligent digging into ideas that I find in my travels all over the world. My personal gratitude goes to that world—represented by the many ideas the authors in this volume have brought together. Thank you all!

# Index

## A

- Abandon *traditional* ways, 419
- Abduction, 308–310, 358, 359
- Abductive conjecture, 359
- Abductive generalization, 359
- Abductive knowledge, 359
- Abductive reasoning, 421
- Abstraction, 355
- Academic responsibilities, 411
- Action, 367, 372
- Action Quantum, 394
- Action-theoretical cultural psychology
  - conceptions and research programs, 363
  - contemporary, 375
  - theory of action, 364
- Action-theoretical thinking, 366, 367
- Action theory, 363, 372
- Action-typological differentiations, 366
- Active subject, 328–333
- Adult-child interaction, 72
- Advanced mentalization-based therapy, 425
- Aesthetic experience, 234
- Aestheticological, 247
- Aesthetics, 273–275, 280, 281
  - culture, 8, 9
  - mind, 8, 9
- Affect, 77, 78, 81–84
- Affective fields, 82
- Affective meanings, 358
- Affective processes, 248, 357
- Affective semiosis, 81, 357, 358
- Affective-Semiotic Fields
  - Dialogical Self Development, 143, 146, 148–150
  - human mind, 146
  - human psyche, 146
  - prejudices, 149
  - semiosis, 146
  - Valsiner, J., 146
  - values, 143, 148–150
- Affective-Semiotic Self-Regulatory Model, 147, 148
- Agent causality, 422
- Aktualgenese, 25
- Ambivalence, 262, 263, 266–271
- American pragmatism, 374
- American Psychological Association, 419
- American universities, 459
- Amerindian perspectivism, 315–317
- Amplification, 174, 175, 177
- Analytic therapy, 171
- Analytical *a priori* vs. synthetic *a posteriori*, 380
- Anticipatory generalization, 357
- Anti-naturalistic tendency, 381
- Anti-social patterns, 145
- Applied psychology, 397
- Approximations, 393
- Aristotle
  - ethics, 34
  - human beings, 34
  - human science, 33
  - psychology, 33
  - social constructionism, 33
- Aristotle's scheme, 367
- Art as Experience*, 234
- Arts-based methods, 405
- Atmosphere, 9

- Aufhebung*, 396  
 Autonomous subject, 371  
 Autonomy, 372, 374
- B**
- Bakhtin, 194, 196–198  
 Becoming/evolution, 393  
 Behavior  
   databases, 273  
   human experience, 273  
   life and theatre swinging, 273, 274  
   naturalist theatre  
     abductive production, 276  
     performance text, 274, 275  
     shaping of enactive arguments,  
       277, 278  
     stage figures, 275, 276  
   semiotic mediation, 273  
   semiotics  
     black box, 281, 282  
     enactive arguments, 279–281  
     human behavior, 278  
     I position, 278, 279  
     trajectory of experience, 278, 279
- Behaviorism, 33  
 Being, 397  
 The best explanation, 421  
 Bicultural identity, 212  
 Bicultural identity integration (BII), 204  
 Biculturalism, 7  
   acculturation, 203  
   alternation model, 203  
   assimilation model, 203  
   binary logic, 201  
   co-genetic logic, 207  
   cultural psychological research, 201  
   culture, 206  
   deficit-oriented perspective, 202  
   flexibility and stability, 207–208  
   inclusive separation, 206, 208  
   individuals and ethnocultural groups, 203  
   migration, 202  
   multicultural model, 203  
   newer models, 204, 205  
   non-academic professional career, 202  
   psychological processes, 206  
   socio-cultural context, 202  
   usual and abductive class membership  
     determination, 207
- Bifurcation points (BFP), 213, 216, 217,  
 449, 451  
 Big scientific chance, 361  
*Bildung*
- Arendt, Hannah, 32, 34, 35  
 Aristotle, 32, 33  
 concept, 30  
 definition, 30  
 educational thinking, 31  
 German philosophy, 30  
 human development, 31  
 humanity, 31, 32  
 practice, 31  
 self-development, 31
- Biographical consistency, 373  
 Bipolar semiotic structure, 358  
 Blackouts  
   complex social phenomena, 414  
   critical factors, 415  
   experiences, 414  
   FirstEnergy Corp, 414  
   individuals, 415  
   memory, 414  
   myriad, 415  
   NPCC, 414  
   NYC, 414  
   ruptures, 417  
   social commentaries, 414  
   spirit of comradeship, 415
- Body, 237, 238  
 Bohr's and Heisenberg's interpretations, 395  
 Bologna system, 458  
 Bose-Einstein condensates, 395  
 Boundary, 271, 355  
 Bounded indeterminacy of tradition  
   bidirectional personal-cultural  
     channelling, 106
- Boesch, 110  
 canalization, 108  
 cultural-historical context, 111  
 culture, 111  
 dialogue, 106, 110–112  
 equifinality principle, 108  
 exclusive separation, 107  
 Gadamer, 106, 110–112  
 genetic-cultural heritage, 105  
 hermeneutic circle, 113  
 hermeneutics, 110, 112, 113  
 historical-cultural tradition, 110  
 human being, 107  
 human communication, 113  
 human cultural construction, 106  
 human development psychology, 106–108  
 inclusive separation, 107  
 innovation, 109  
 interrelated and simultaneous levels, 108  
 intra- and inter-psychological levels, 109  
 limited autonomy, 109

- meta-theoretical level, 110
- ontological subjects, 106
- open systems, 107
- personal development, 108
- pre-conceptions, 111, 113
- self-development, 109
- semiotic-cultural psychology, 105, 106, 109
- theoretical-methodological predication, 108
- Brandom, Robert
  - inferentialism, 385
  - inferentialist conception of rationality, 383
  - influential work, 382
  - normative character, 383
  - normative pragmatics, 380, 388
  - official rationale, 383
  - pragmatic significance, 384
  - semantic tradition, 385
  - social philosophy, 380
  - vocabulary, 386, 387
- Brandom's Hegelianism, 387
- Breastfeeding
  - ambivalence, 268
  - breast milk, 269
  - child, 268
  - child well-being, 269–271
  - time length, 269
- Bridging, 390
- British shilling, 385
- Bronfenbrenner's bioecological approach, 64
- Bronfenbrenner's bioecological models, 61
- Bronfenbrenner's ecological approach, 58
  - bioecological model, 59
  - culture, 59
  - internalization/externalization system, 60
  - macro-system, 58
  - microsystem, 58
  - proximal processes, 59
- C**
- Canalization, 79, 81
- Capital*, 47
- Capitalism, 43
- Carl Gustav Carus, 461
- Carnavalesque pedagogy, 194, 196–198
- Castration anxiety, 421
- Catalysis
  - blackouts, 413–415
  - chemical reactions, 411
  - critiques, 412
  - cultural psychology, 411
  - definition, 411
  - empirical phenomena, 412
  - incorporation, 410
  - liminality, 416–417
  - SSCT approach, 413
  - status, 412
  - systemic changes, 413
  - theoretical development, 413
- Catalytic causality theory* (CCT), 413
- Catalytic models, 410
- Catalytic processes, 416, 424
- Catalytic sign-regulatory systems, 424
- Catalytic systems, 424
- Causal attributions, 422
- Causal claims, 425
- Causal covering laws, 423
- Causal dispositionalism, 420, 422, 424
  - catalysis, 425
- Causal dispositionalists, 423
- Causality, 410
  - abandonment, 420
  - alternative accounts, 422
  - catalysis, 460
  - dispositional properties, 422
  - Humean regularity theory, 422, 423
- Causality talk, 422, 423
- Causal mechanisms, 419
- Causal powers, 423, 424
- Causal relations, 423
- Centrality meaning, 360
- Centre for Sociocultural and Activity Research, 194
- Chemistry, 410, 416, 417
- Circularity, 387
- Circumvention strategies, 433
- Citation capital, 458
- Classical schism, 391
- Clinically relevant theory, 425
- Clinical psychology, 181
- Co-constructivism, 122
- Co-genetic logic, 207
- Cognitive and neurobiological mechanisms, 360
- Cognitive turn, 363
- Coincidence concept, 370
- Collage-making, 406
- Collective-cultural canalization, 80
- Collective-cultural resources, 80
- Collective culture, 431
- Collective group (WE), 429
- Collective processes, 42, 289
- Collective self, 436
- Collective voices, 436
- Comparative Study of Human Cultural Development (book), 444

- Complementarity, 394, 396
- Complementarity vs. realism, 394–396
- Complementary conceptualizations, 366
- Complex wholes, 434
- Complexity, 409
- Complimentary systemic perspectives, 409
- Conceptual consensus, 401
- Conceptual development, 402
- Conceptualizations, 372
- Constraints, 79, 81
- Contemporary cognitive science, 402
- Contemporary cultural psychology, 355, 356
- Contemporary pragmatism, 380
- Contemporary psychologists, 409
- Contextual grounding, 415
- Contextualization, 415
- Contextual/situational aspects, 366
- Copenhagen Interpretation, 395
- Creativity, 186, 271, 401, 406
- Crisis of psychology, 391
- Critical psychology, 49
- Crystalline structures, 393
- Cultural and cross-cultural psychology, 364
- Cultural anthropology, 193
- Cultural canalization processes, 144
- Cultural change, 290
- Cultural developmental psychology
  - perspective, 7
- Cultural diversity, 289
- Cultural dopes, 364
- Cultural ecology
  - cultural psychology, 327
  - developing students
    - cultural developmental psychology, 330
    - hyper-generalized signs, 332
    - international research teams, 333
    - micro-genetic level, 331
    - modern society, 329
    - person-person and person-context relationship, 330
    - production, 332
    - psychological and semiotic theories, 329
    - psychological processes, 331
    - school administrative organization, 331
    - school context, 329–332
    - school intervention research, 330
    - signs functions, 332
    - social and cultural environment, 329
    - social interactions, 330
    - transformation, 332
  - developmental and educational researches, 327
  - developmental science, 328, 329
  - modern society, 328
  - psychology classes, 327
  - self-expansion, 327
- Cultural exchange, 290
- Cultural fields, 319
- Cultural frame switching (CFS), 204
- Cultural guidance system, 135
- Cultural-historical theory, 153, 154
- Cultural meanings, 437
- Cultural nature
  - human development, 4
- Culturalness, 360
- Cultural processes, 290
  - cultural psychology, 88
  - detritorialization, 94–96
  - expansion and synthetic condensation, 97, 98
  - irreversible time, 87, 90, 91
  - reterritorialization, 98–100
  - shadow trajectory, 88–90, 93, 94
  - TEM model, 87
  - transition, 92
  - virtuality, 94–96
- Cultural psychological-based semantic consciousness, 388
- Cultural-psychological conception, 363
- Cultural psychological framework, 429, 430
- Cultural psychological phenomenon, 435
- Cultural psychological practices, 388
- Cultural psychology, 71, 78, 79, 84, 105, 129, 130, 143, 154, 243–245, 315, 317, 327–330, 332–334, 360
  - action theory, 364, 365
  - anti-psychologistic, 382
  - Bildung* (see *Bildung*)
  - explicitly/implicitly orient, 364
  - meaning framework, 118
  - organized psychological functions, 22
  - semiotic mediation, 29
  - thinking, 32
  - twenty-first-century, 19, 27
  - Valsiner, Jaan (see Valsiner, Jaan)
- Cultural systems, 78, 226
- Cultural transfer, 7
- Cultural transmission, 7
- Cultural values, 290
- Culture, 30, 111, 445
  - abduction, 308
  - academic community, 310–311
  - academic production, 306
  - collaboration, 310
  - collective and personal levels, 308
  - community, 307
  - components, 185

- constructive processes, 308
  - creativity, 185, 186
  - definitions, 185
  - developmental and semiotic cultural psychology, 185
  - dynamic transformation, 309
  - educational projects, 308
  - experience, time and movement, 305
  - field of perception, 187
  - generalization, 309
  - generativity, 310
  - geographical locations, 304
  - globalizing and democratizing cultural psychology, 304
  - group/community, 185
  - human beings, 303, 304, 307
  - incredibly productive, 305
  - indigenous groups, 304
  - informal contexts, 306
  - institution, 307
  - Integrating Experiences, 305
  - knowledge production, 309
  - learning expectations, 308
  - material and social contingencies, 186
  - material and symbolic forms, 186
  - microgenetic process, 189
  - outcome, 308
  - person and social world, 304
  - pragmatist consequences, 189, 190
  - production of knowledge, 303
  - recognition, 306
  - scientific reasoning, 309
  - smartphones, 187
  - social media users, 189
  - sociogenesis, 186
  - sociogenetic processes, 187
  - sociogenetic transformation, 188
  - spatial and psychological phenomenon, 305
  - teaching arrangements, 308
  - time segments, 309
  - variation, 309
  - variety of issues, 304
  - Culture and Psychology, 412, 436
  - Culture and the Development of Children's Actions*, 79
- D**
- Darkness, 413
  - Data, 403, 406, 459
  - Deceit, 283
  - Decentred autonomy, 373
  - Decentred identity, 373
  - Decentred subject, 373
  - Deconstruction, 175, 176
  - Decrowning-crowning, 198, 199
  - Dependencies, 375
  - Deterritorialization, 88, 92, 94–96, 99, 102
  - Development, 72, 73, 78, 79, 81
  - Developmental-holistic psychology, 27
  - Developmental psychology, 3, 35, 121, 444
  - Developmental science, 3–5, 327–329, 334
  - Developmental systems theory
    - bioecological framework, 60
    - culture, 60
    - learning and development, 60
    - perspective, 61
  - Dewey, 233–236, 238–240
  - Dialogical Self development, 148–150
  - Dialogical Self System, 146, 149
  - Dialogical Self Theory (DST), 148, 436
  - Dictatorship, 224, 226, 227, 229
  - Differential theory of action, 374
  - Diffusion, 186, 187
  - Dispositional, 368
  - Dispositionalism
    - advancement, 423
    - catalysis, 420
    - causal and etiological, 421
    - implications, 425
    - psychotherapy, 425
    - singular patient's experience, 425
    - singularist* view, 423
  - Donor portraits
    - behavior, 251
    - contact portraits, 252, 253
    - cultural psychology, 251
      - contact portraits, 253–255
      - emotional experience, 254
      - human meaning-making processes, 256
      - mortality, 257
      - processes, 257
      - semiotic, 253, 255, 256
      - vacatio spiritualis*, 254
      - Vorbild*, 257, 258
    - culture, 253
  - Dynamic, 356
  - Dynamic holism, 356, 357
  - Dynamic Self Positionings (DSP), 149, 150
  - Dynamics, 263, 267, 268, 270
- E**
- Education, 30
  - Educational systems, 140
  - Educational thinking, 31
  - Ego psychology, 170

Elementary sensations, 357  
 Emergence, 356  
 Emotions, 244  
 Empirical ability, 373  
 Empirical methods, 380  
 Enactive argument, 277–282  
 Enactment and transformation, 178, 179  
 Energeticist model, 47  
 Environment, 358  
 Epistemological, 395  
 Epistemology, 320, 321, 323  
   psychology, 10–12  
 Equifinality, 5, 448  
 Equifinality in development, 446  
 Equifinality points (EFP), 213, 448  
 Equifinality sampling, 447  
 Estonia, 71, 72, 74, 75  
 Ethical reflection, 320  
 Ethics, 319–321  
 Evidence-based mainstream psychology, 356  
 Expansive semiosis  
   literature, 135–137  
 Experimentation, 188, 189  
 Explanation of action, 365, 366, 368

## F

### Facts

culturally mediated signs, 381  
 cultural psychology, 382  
 finished nature, 381  
 human reason, 380  
 knowledge and beliefs, 381  
 Latin *factum*, 380  
 normative character, 380  
 notion, 380  
 psychological science, 381  
 psychology, 381  
 scientific methodology, 381  
 synthetic sentences, 380  
 Factual semantic content, 383  
 Fame games, 458  
 Feeling and affect, 234  
*Festschrift*, 457  
 Fictionalization, 437  
 Field of mediated activity  
   biological environment, 163  
   deictic field, 163  
   human beings, 165  
   human condition, 165  
   language activity, 165  
   language psychology, 163  
   language signs, 165  
   role of objects, 164

  semiotized field in process, 165  
   semi-public conversations, 164  
   stance, 163  
   symbolic field, 163  
 Fields, 234–236, 239  
 Field sign, 355  
 The Flat Earth Society, 392  
 Flow of motion, 90, 91  
 Forgotten methods, 402  
 Formal property, 392  
 Forms, 236–240  
 Forward-oriented semiosis, 154  
*Foundations of Cultural Psychology*, 81  
 Fragmentation of knowledge, 391  
 Free self-determination, 373  
 Freud's psychoanalytic disillusionments, 373  
 Functionality, 433  
 Functional unity, 435

## G

Ganzheitspsychologie, 23–27, 130  
*Geisteswissenschaften*, 409  
 Generalization, 38, 460  
 Generalized knowledge, 358  
 Genesis, 78  
 Genetic Ganzheitspsychologie, 19, 23, 25–27  
 Geographical blindness, 345  
 German constitutionalism, 43  
 Gesture, 274, 276–279, 409  
 Global psychology  
   academic community, 298  
   borders and boundaries, 297  
   British rule, 288  
   co-constructive dynamics, 298  
   community, 299  
   cross-cultural psychology, 288, 298, 299  
   cultural processes, 288, 298  
   cultural relevance, 287  
   cultural-social worlds, 297  
   culture, 289–291  
   dynamic engagement, 287  
   global knowledge, 287  
   humanities, 288  
   human psychological processes, 297  
   India, 291–295  
   Indian Psychology, 295–297, 299  
   indigenous knowledge, 287  
   modern scientific methods, 288  
   philosophical traditions, 287  
   social contexts, 298  
   socialization practices, 299  
   social sciences, 288  
   Western ideology, 288

Goal-directed everyday conduct, 405  
 Goal-directedness, 364  
 The group, 431

**H**

Heisenberg's choice, 395  
 Hempel's covering law model, 423  
 Hermeneutic and explanatory analysis, 368  
 Hermeneutic-explanatory tasks, 367  
 Hermeneutics, 110, 112, 113, 364, 368  
 Hierarchically organized system, 397  
 Hierarchical organization, 170, 410  
 Higher mental functions, 364  
 Historically Structured Inviting (HSI),  
 443, 447  
 Historically Structured Sampling  
 (HSS), 447–449  
 Historiography, 370  
 History of psychology, 2, 3, 26  
 Holism, 57, 58, 65, 393  
 Hollow structures, 384  
 Homophony, 436  
 Human being, 107  
 Human conduct, 145  
 Human cultural self-organization, 432  
 Human culture and language, 391  
 Human development, 4, 31, 108  
 Human development psychology, 107  
 Humanism, 46  
 Humanity, 31, 34  
   *Bildung*, 31, 32, 34  
   cultural processes, 30  
   culture, 30  
   twentieth century, 30  
 Human meaning systems, 402  
 Human psyche, 401, 419, 432  
 Human psychological development, 4  
 Human sciences, 118, 120  
 Human sign-regulatory system, 423  
 Human spirit, 42  
 Human verbalization, 13  
 Humanization, 41  
 Humean perspective, 423  
 Humean portrayal of causation, 424  
 Humans, 133  
 Hyper-empiricism, 411  
 Hyper-generalization, 357, 460  
 Hyper-generalized affective semiotic fields, 6  
 Hyper-generalized ideas, 458  
 Hyper-generalized passion, 460  
 Hypothesized deductions, 421

**I**

I-AM cycle  
   cultural psychological model, 430  
   cyclical movement, 430  
   liminality, 432  
   normativity, 432  
   open-system modeling, 731  
   psychology, 431  
   resistance, 433  
   self-reflexivity, 429, 439  
   self-singular identity, 429  
   transition, 431  
 Identities generated by groups (WE-AM), 429  
 Identity, 435  
 Identity-defining, 392, 393  
 Ideological nomothetic-idiographic  
   juxtaposition plaguing  
   psychology, 358  
 Imaginative acts, 434  
 Inclusive separation, 206, 208  
 Incompatibilities, 387  
 Indian identity, 292  
 Indian Psychology, 287, 288, 293–297, 299  
 Indigenous psychology, 287, 298  
 Individual agency, 431  
 Individual and social sensemaking, 358  
 Individual-focused psychology, 429  
 Individualizing group-based voices, 438  
 Individual's I-AM cycle, 435  
 Individual's *self*-development, 31  
 Individual-socioecological reference, 434  
 Inductive generalization, 359  
 Inferentialism, 385  
 Inferential relations, 386  
 Inferential semantics, 383, 385, 386  
 Initiation ceremony, 417  
 Innovation of life through Education, 307  
 Innovative pre-factum methods, 406  
 Inspirational incentive, 419  
 Integrative declarations of principle, 397  
 Integrative Psychological and Behavioral  
   Science, 359  
 Intellectual interdependency, 52  
 Intentional, 365  
 Intentionalist model, 369  
 Intentionalist rational model, 365, 366  
 Intentionality, 364  
 Inter- and transdisciplinary orientation, 365  
 Intercultural heterogeneity, 290  
 Interdisciplinary, 73–75  
 Interdisciplinary orientation, 365  
 Interface, 393  
 Intergroup conflict, 137–138  
 Interiorizing language, 162

- Internal networking, 398  
 International Congress of Psychology (ICP), 447  
 International Psychological Association, 449  
 International tandems, 459  
 Interpersonal psychoanalysis  
   amplification, 174, 175  
   analytic therapy, 171, 172  
   cis-gender white male, 179  
   clinical psychology, 181  
   co-constructed process, meaning making, 171  
   cultural lens, 173  
   deconstruction, 175, 176  
   developmental deficits, 172  
   dialectical process, 172  
   enactment and transformation, 178, 179  
   frame, 171  
   hyper-generalized system, 180  
   intellectualized and abstract, 180  
   meaning making, 171, 173, 180  
   reflection, 173, 174  
   regulation, 176–178  
   relational turn, 171  
   semiotic processes, 172  
   semiotic system, 171, 180  
 Interpretation, 275, 276, 282  
 Interpretive cultural psychology, 363  
 Interrelatedness, 445  
 Intersubjective powers, 373  
 Intervention, 177  
 Intimacy  
   affective experience, 263  
   boundary, 262, 263, 271  
   breastfeeding (*see* Breastfeeding)  
   cultural psychology, 262  
   development, 262  
   emergent process, 266, 267  
   environment, 262  
   irreversible flow of time, 261  
   self-condensation, 264, 265  
   self-disclosure, 264, 265  
   self-expression, 263  
   self-reflection, 263  
   sexuality, 263  
 Intuition, 407  
 Irreversible time, 87, 90, 91, 392, 449, 459  
 Irrevocable nonlinguistic performance, 383  
 I-WANT concept, 432  
 I-WISH concept, 433
- J**  
 Jaan Valsiner's cultural psychology, 364
- Jaan's pedagogical practice, 194–196  
 James, 234, 237  
 Juxtaposition, 358
- K**  
 "Kitchen-seminars" (k-seminars), 10, 389, 390  
 Koki, 451
- L**  
 Labor-power, 44  
 Langer, 234, 236, 239, 240  
 Language, 22, 126, 155  
 Language activity, 165  
 Language-based semiosis, 155  
 Language philosophy, 158  
 Language sign, 155  
   Bühler, 156  
   decoupling, 162  
   deictic field, 157  
   displacing movement, 158  
   interiorizing language, 162  
   meaning, 160  
   mechanical force, 159  
   mediation, 157  
   organon model, 157  
   otherness, 155, 161  
   production, 160  
   psychic experience, 160  
   reversion, 162  
   self-contained system, 159  
   social contact, 161  
   social irritant, 161  
   social language, 162  
   speech-thinking, 163  
   symbolic field, 158  
   transposition, 162  
   utterance, 159  
   Vološinov, 158–161  
   Vygotsky, 160–162  
 Language-theoretical and textual approach, 365  
 Langue, 6, 123  
 Latin *factum*, 380  
 Leader-follower, 225, 228, 229  
 Lecturing, 458  
 Leipzig school of psychology, 23  
 Liminality  
   events and experiences, 416  
   initiation rite, 416  
   psychological movement, 416  
   *rite of passage*, 416  
   self-categorizations, 417

threshold, 416  
 unbinding and binding, 416  
 Linear causality, 422  
 Linear cause and effect models, 410, 412  
 Linguistic articulateness, 373  
 Linguistic system theory, 123  
 Linguistic turn, 120  
 Literature, 436  
 Lived experience, 118, 126, 127  
 "Living room seminars" (l-seminars), 10  
 Local abductive modelling, 359  
 Local culture, 291, 294  
 Local modelling practices, 360  
 Logical positivism, 381  
 Lower counterparts concepts, 398

**M**

Mainstream psychology, 359, 401, 403  
 Manifesto, 397  
 Mannerisms, 436  
 Marx's adoption, 40  
 Marx's critique, 45  
 Meaning making, 144, 187–189, 244, 248, 402, 405, 420, 431  
 Meanings, 136, 274, 280, 283, 356, 357  
 Mechanical physics, 33  
 Meditation, 35  
 Mereological fallacy, 393  
 Metaparadigmatic alternative, 401  
 Metaphorical-anthropomorphic endowment, 372  
 Metaphors, 375  
 Metaphysics, 44, 45  
 Metatheoretical paradigms, 57  
 Methodological approaches, 401  
 Methodological framework, 404  
 Methodological improvements, 406  
 Methodological myopia, 14  
 Methodological thinking, 402, 404, 406  
 Methodology, 12, 14  
 Microgenesis, 25, 450  
 Modal articulation, 434  
 Modern interpretation, 421  
 Modern psychoanalysis, 421  
 Moore's law, 38  
 Moral context sensitivity, 374  
 Motivational-cognitive complex, 367  
 Multifaceted environments, 409  
 Multifurcation points, 405  
 Mutually beneficial relations, 422

**N**

Narrative model  
   action, 369, 371  
   action description and explanation, 372  
   contingency, 370  
   creativity, 371  
   poietic function, 371  
   power of disposal, 370  
   self-determination and self-realization, 371  
   storytelling, 370  
   temporally complex realities, 370  
   temporally structured contexts, 370  
   temporal structure, 370  
   time-honoured rule, 371  
 Narrative psychology, 365  
 Narrative-theoretical approach, 371  
 Narrowness, 356  
 Natural sciences, 118, 390  
 Naturphilosophie, 130  
*Naturwissenschaft*, 409  
 Neurosciences, 396, 424  
 Non-cognitive thinking, 35  
 Non-instrumental thinking, 36  
 Non-vicious circularity, 387  
 Normal science, 459  
 Normative pragmatics, 383–385  
 Normative science, 29  
 Normativity, 29, 30, 33, 432  
 Northeast Power Coordinating Council (NPCC), 414

**O**

Objective phenomena, 395  
 Obligatory passage point (OPP), 450  
 Ontological state concepts, 398  
 Ontology, 317, 318, 320–323  
 Open-system methodology, 431  
 Open systems, 144  
 Organic and inorganic bodies, 44  
 Organic development, 126  
 Origin of signs, 126–129  
 Origins of semiosis, 127  
 Ornamented Lives  
   aesthetic rationality, 238  
   affective explosion, 236  
   art historical and cultural analyses, 234  
   body-based forms, 238  
   cultural psychology, 235  
   fundedness, 240  
   integrity, 235  
   interior sign fields, 234  
   internal affective fields, 236  
   linearity and curvilinearity, 237

- Ornamented Lives (*cont.*)
- material and cultural-semiotic environments, 239
  - minor arts, 233–234
  - multiple intersections, 233
  - natural syntax, 237
  - organization of activities, 234
  - “peripheral” dimension, 236
  - permanent tonicity, 239
  - physiognomic value, 236
  - practical character of reality, 238
  - psychological system, 235–236
  - quality, 234
  - recurrent overstimulation, 238
  - rhythmic patterns, 237
  - self-world relation, 238
  - sense qualities, 236
  - sensorimotor and affective systems, 234
  - significant forms, 240
  - social and cultural matrices, 235
  - social psychology, 235
  - types, 239
  - vital matrix, 239
- P**
- Paul Stenner’s theory of liminality, 416
- Pedagogical style, 1
- Peirce, 234, 236, 239, 240
- Peircean triadic theory, 356
- Permeability of borders, 206
- Perpetual autonomy of action, 374
- Persistent innovator, 1
- Personal convictions, 461
- Personal development, 4
- Personality research, 402
- Personalization, 382
- Phenomenological understanding, 404
- Philosophy, 154, 155, 318
- Physical chemistry, 459
- Play, 187
- Pleromatic generalization, 460
- Pleromatization, 8, 82, 458, 460
- aestheticological, 247
  - affects, 244, 245
  - cultural psychology, 243
  - emotional guidance, 244
  - emotions, 244, 245
  - feelings, 244, 245
  - human mind and culture, 243
  - Individuum est ineffabile*, 245–247
  - poetic instants, 248
  - process-oriented approach, 243
  - reality, 243
- Poetic genesis, 263, 267, 268, 270
- Poetic instants*, 244, 248
- Poetry, 263, 264, 270, 271
- Polarized equifinality point (P-EFP), 449
- Polemic touch, 393
- Political plasticity
- American Revolution, 226
  - behavior, 225
  - cognitions, 224, 226, 227
  - correct way of thinking, 226
  - critical assessment, 226
  - cultural limitations
    - efficient causation, 227
    - human behavior, 227
    - informal normative system, 228, 229
    - institutions, 228
    - leadership, 229
    - limitation, 228
    - local cultural practices, 228
    - mainstream psychology, 227
    - medical treatment, 227
    - revolution, 229
    - superficial changes, 229
  - cultural system, 226
  - democracy, 223
  - democratic constitutions, 226
  - democratic societies, 226
  - dictatorship–democracy continuum, 224, 225
  - financial investment and resources, 224
  - problem-solving, 226
  - revolution, 225
  - science of psychology, 224
  - sets of factors, 227
  - socialization, 226
  - social level, 226
  - social relations, 224
- Portugal, 214, 215, 217, 218
- Practical-symbolic production, 364
- Pre-constructive/*pre-factum* methods, 402
- Predicates, 430–432, 437
- Pre-learning, 446
- Principles of Psychology*, 234
- Private boundaries, 263, 264, 266–268, 270
- Privileged position, 437
- Problematic reductive tendency, 396
- Process of transformation, 4
- Process-oriented model, 271
- Proculturation, 212, 215, 219
- Proto-symbolic semiotics, 130
- Pseudo-rehumanization, 47
- Psyche, 364
- Psychic functions, 364
- Psychoanalysis, 374, 420, 421
- analytic field, 169, 170
  - ego psychology, 170

frame, 169, 170  
   non-analytic practice, 170  
 Psychoanalytic models, 373  
 Psychoanalytic theories, 357, 358, 425  
 Psychoanalytic thought models, 420, 421, 425  
 Psychological anthropology, 193  
 Psychological defense mechanisms, 174  
 Psychological development model, 431  
 Psychological knowledge, 381  
 Psychological phenomena, 358, 359, 423  
 Psychological praxis, 391  
 Psychological processes, 357  
 Psychological research, 406, 437  
 Psychological science, 401, 460  
 Psychological theories, 421  
 Psychologists' self-presentation, 410  
 Psychology, 3, 9, 14, 122, 143, 144, 153, 318  
   epistemology, 10–12  
   literature, 436  
   normativity, 29, 30, 33  
   science, 355  
   scientific knowledge, 11  
 Psychology of action, 369  
 Psychology of personality, 393  
 Psychology's social relevance, 410  
 Psychotherapy, 419, 421  
 Psychotherapy research, 420  
 Public, 264–266, 268–270  
 Public-facing identity, 437

## Q

Quale consciousness, 236  
 Qualitative psychology, 348  
 Quality, 234, 238, 240  
 Quantification, 38  
 Quantified self movement, 38  
 Quantitative psychological research, 382  
 Quantum mechanics, 394, 395  
 Queen's shilling, 383

## R

Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), 419  
 Rational consciousness, 371  
 Rationalistic "illusions of autonomy", 365  
 Real ecology, 398  
 Reality checks, 392  
 Real mechanical movement, 393  
 Real science concepts, 396  
 Reconstructive/*post-factum* methods, 402  
 Red concept, 386  
 Reductive mainstream psychology, 390  
 Redundant control, 139  
 Reflective listening, 173, 174, 177

Regularity theory, 423  
 Regulation, 79–81, 176–178  
 Relation of correspondence/truth, 391  
 Relationality, 375  
 Renaissance paintings, 460  
 Replication, 51  
 Resistance, 458  
 Responsible responsiveness, 14  
 Restrictive semiosis  
   intergroup conflict, 137–138  
 Reterritorialization, 88, 92, 94, 98, 99, 101  
 Reversibility, 139, 140  
 Reversion, 162  
 Rhythm, 238, 239  
 Ritsumeikan University, 445  
 Rom Harré's seminal efforts, 422  
 Rule-guided action model, 368  
 Rule knowledge, 368

## S

Sampling, 447  
 Schematization, 8, 82, 244–246, 460  
 School context, 329–332  
 School shooting, 411  
 Science of psyche  
   academic psychology, 340  
   biology, 343  
   developing sciences, 343  
   epistemology, 346, 347  
   geographical selectivity, 345  
   Jaan's theories, 348, 349  
   mainstream approach, 341  
   mainstream psychology, 340, 342, 345  
   methodology, 346, 347  
   physics, 343  
   psychology, 342, 344  
   statistical data analysis methods, 340  
   study of mind, 341  
   theoretical orientations and  
     approaches, 341  
 Scientific knowledge, 11  
 Scientific practices, 311  
 Scientific revolutions, 459  
 Self-determination, 371, 373  
 Self-development, 31, 109  
 Self-optimization, 45  
 Self-realization, 371  
 Self-reflexivity, 403, 432  
 Self-regulation, 79  
 Self-tracking, 39, 40  
 Semantic/conceptual self-consciousness, 387  
 Semantic contact, 137, 138  
 Semiology, 6  
   consciousness, 121

- Semiology (*cont.*)  
 developmental psychology, 121  
 langue, 123  
 linguistic turn, 120  
 sign, 120, 129  
 social meaning, 119
- Semiosis, 111, 126, 130, 135, 140, 153, 154  
 guidance, 135  
 interpretant, 134  
 meaning, 135  
 meta-signs, 135  
 Peirce, 134  
 possibility, 135  
 psychology, 134  
 signs, 134, 135  
 Valsiner, J., 134
- Semiotic catalysts, 411
- Semiotic-cultural constructivism, 315,  
 319, 320
- Semiotic-cultural psychology, 106, 109, 111,  
 253, 360, 410
- Semiotic-cultural theory, 122
- Semiotic elaborations, 317, 323
- Semiotic guidance, 77–82, 84
- Semiotic hierarchies, 434
- Semiotic mediation, 79, 173
- Semiotic mind, 5, 7
- Semiotic organizers, 433
- Semiotic processes  
 Beckett, 139  
 cultural guidance, 140  
 expansive and restrictive semiosis, 139  
 intergroup context, 139  
 pronouns, 139  
 redundant control, 139  
 reversibility, 139, 140
- Semiotic regulation of the self, 79
- Semiotics, 3, 144, 153, 391, 397, 398  
 abstract objectivism, 121  
 cultural psychology, 126, 130  
 definition, 120  
 developmental psychology, 121, 130  
 human awareness, 122  
 human developmental phenomena, 122  
 Langer, S.K., 128  
 langue, 123  
 linguistic system theory, 123  
 linguistic turn, 120  
 Naturphilosophie, 121  
 Peirce, C.S., 119, 121  
 sentience, 125  
 sign, 119, 120, 123, 129  
 social language, 126  
 social science, 125  
 symbolic content, 128  
 Valsiner, Jaan, 121, 122, 125
- Semiotic stems, 432
- Semiotic vocabulary, 387
- Sense, 276, 277, 280–282
- Sense of belonging  
 acculturation and bicultural identity  
 research, 212  
 acculturation and multicultural  
 identity, 219  
 attachment patterns, 212  
 challenges, 219  
 defense mechanism, 220  
 ethnic group, 220  
 evaluation processes, 220  
 feeling of security, 211  
 first-generation, 215–219  
 IRMA project, 219  
 Luxembourg, 214  
 meditation and stress prevention, 212  
 migration, 211  
 migration research, 213, 214  
 proacculturation, 212  
 second generation, 218–220  
 social and spatial aspects, 212, 220  
 social network, 214  
 symbolic/imaginative, 211  
 tasks, 219  
 TEM, 213
- Sensemaker, 358
- Sensemaking, 356, 357, 360
- Sensuality in Human Living*, 83
- Sentience, 125
- Shadow form, 95, 96, 98, 99
- Shadow trajectory, 87–90
- Sigmund Freud's early development of clinical  
 theories, 425
- Sign, 233, 234  
*aliquid pro aliquo*, 119  
 definition, 118, 120  
 elements, 120  
 icons, 135  
 indexes, 135  
 interpretation, 134  
 language, 123  
*langue*, 119, 121  
 minds, 134  
 Peirce, C.S., 120, 123, 124  
 psychophysical phenomenon, 119  
 semiology (*see* Semiology)  
 semiotics (*see* Semiotics)  
 static and abstract model, 122  
 supra-individual system, 119  
 symbols, 135
- Singular individual's identity (AM), 429

- Social and cultural psychological power analyses, 369
  - Social and cultural theory-based action sciences, 368
  - Social- and culture-theoretically oriented science, 368
  - Social and political conceptualization, 44
  - Social construction, 33, 317
  - Social determinism, 364
  - Social domains, 91, 92
  - Social environment, 4, 316
  - Social facts, 382
  - Social grouping, 436
  - Social guidance (SG), 450, 451
  - Social institutions, 145, 410
  - Social interaction, 128
  - Sociality, 364
  - Social life, 320
  - Socially constructed self, 439
  - Social meaning, 119
  - Social mind, 51, 52, 153
  - Social philosophy, 71
  - Social relationships, 289
  - Social representations, 414
  - Social sciences, 120, 289, 459
  - Social situation, 436
  - Social structure, 416
  - Societal institution, 368
  - Society, 144
  - Sociocultural approaches, 58, 62
    - artifacts and tools, 62–63
    - culture and individual interactions, 62
    - socio-historical changes, 62
    - tools and artifacts, 63
  - Sociocultural change, 361
  - Sociocultural dynamics, 360
  - Sociocultural perspectives, 63, 64
  - Socioeconomic inequalities, 360
  - Sociogenesis, 186
  - Sociogenetic developmental personologist, 26
  - Socratic thoughtfulness, 35
  - Soviet educational system, 51
  - Specific real-world connection, 406
  - Specificity, 396
  - Speech writers, 435
  - Spiritualization, 41, 44
  - Standard treatment schemes, 458
  - Stanislavski's system, 275
  - Stem-based analysis, 429
  - Stem concepts
    - building, 433
    - generalized intentionality, 433
    - grammatical movements, 434
    - I-AM, 432
    - I-NEED, 432
    - liminality, 432
    - meaning-making, 430
    - methodological power, 433, 434
    - semiotic hierarchy, 433
    - semiotic mechanisms, 433
    - Valsiner's conceptualization, 435
  - Storytelling, 370
  - Stream of consciousness, 282
  - Structural-systemic causality theory* (SSCT), 413
  - Structural-systemic essence, 413
  - Subject-/identity-theoretical reflections, 366
  - Subjective configurations, 396
  - Subjective meaning, 363
  - Subjectivity, 397
  - Subject theory, 365
  - Subject-world relation, 358
  - Supplementary alternative, 421
  - Symbol formation, 128
  - Symbolic systems, 391
  - Symbols, 123, 125–127, 130, 134
  - Symmetrical anthropology, 372
  - Symposium on Cultural Psychology, 446
  - Synthesis, 410, 411, 413
  - System thinking, 397
  - Systematic abductive reasoning, 425
  - Systemic causality, 411, 422
  - Systemic models of causality, 413, 415, 417
  - Systemic transformational causality, 411, 415
  - Systems approach, 58
- T**
- Targets, 393
  - Teleological backgrounds, 368
  - Teleological/intentionalist model, 367
  - Temporally structured contexts, 370
  - Theatre rehearsals, 273
  - Theoretical and phenomenological considerations, 403
  - Theoretical explanation/justification, 403
  - Theory of action, 365, 373
  - Theory of Natural Necessity, 424
  - Thermodynamics, 393
  - Thinking, 30, 34–36
  - Three Layers Model of Genesis (TLMG), 443, 450, 451
  - Time magazine, 413
  - Tinkering, 188, 189
  - Toomela's critique and framework, 413
  - Traditional causality talk, 419, 422
  - Trajectory (T), 213
  - Trajectory equifinality approach (TEA), 13, 213
    - analysis, 447

- Trajectory equifinality approach (TEA) (*cont.*)  
 HSS, 447  
 international developments, 451  
 Japanese qualitative psychology  
 community, 443  
 marketing research, 451  
 subcomponents, 443  
 TLMG, 450, 451  
 triarchic structure, 444
- Trajectory equifinality modeling (TEM), 87,  
 213, 443  
 data analysis tools development, 448, 449  
 diagram, 446  
 equifinality sampling, 447  
 OPP, 450  
 P-EFP, 449, 450  
 qualitative research, 443
- Transitions, 416, 417  
 Transitive hierarchy, 355  
 Transportation system, 414  
 Transposition, 162  
 Truth, 279, 280, 283, 392  
 Tulviste, 71, 74  
 Turner's conceptualization of liminality, 416
- U**  
 Uncertainty, 358  
 Uncertainty interval, 394  
 Uncertainty principle, 394  
 United States Educational Foundation in India  
 (USEFI), 293  
 Universal principle of *resistance*, 433  
 Unspecific distancing, 394  
 Unwavering, 431  
 Unwavering commitment, 438  
 Utterance, 127, 159
- V**  
 Valedictorian's speech, 435  
 Valorative and normative foundations, 367  
 Valsiner, 253–255, 257, 258  
 Valsinerian cultural psychology, 380, 383  
 Valsinerian semiotics, 386  
 Valsinerian theory-building, 380  
 Valsiner, Jaan  
 cultural psychology, 19, 20  
 developmental-holistic psychology, 27  
 elementary processe, consciousness, 21  
 Ganzheitspsychologie, 23–27  
 genetic Ganzheitspsychologie, 19, 23  
 historical-comparative approach, 21  
 language, 22  
 mentorship, 20  
 theoretical contributions, 429  
 Völkerpsychologie, 20–22, 24  
 Valsiner's conceptual framework, 404  
 Valsiner's methodological work, 402  
 Valsiner's Methodology Cycle  
 acknowledgment, 406  
 empirical work, 403  
 intuition, 404  
 methodological moves, 403  
 reasonable and meaningful relations, 403  
 researchers' decision-making, 403  
 solving tensions, 404  
 working, 404  
 Valsiner's semiotic cultural psychology,  
 382, 431  
 Value-oriented attitude, 319  
 Vandalism, 414  
 Violent video games, 409  
 Virtuality, 94–96  
 Volitional-cognitive complex, 367  
 Völkerpsychologie, 20–25  
 Vygotsky, L.S., 49, 50  
 Vygotsky's legacy, 51
- W**  
 Waldenfels' thinking, 372  
 WE-AM cycle  
 considerations, 438  
 divergence, 438  
 individual's construction, 437  
 internal norms, 438  
 stem concepts, 437  
 theoretical advancement, 437  
 Weber, M., 363  
 Western educated industrialized, rich, and  
 democratic (WEIRD), 9  
 Widerfahrnis, 374  
*Wissenschaft*, 41, 47  
 Wittgensteinian notion of family  
 resemblances, 424  
 Women's meaning making, 405  
 Würzburg School, 402
- Y**  
*Yokohama Manifesto*, 419
- Z**  
 Zone of freedom of movement, 73  
 Zone of promoted action, 73