The Social Mind

*The Social Mind* charts the intellectual history of the idea of socially constructed mind through the examination of four key theorists – Lev Vygotsky, George Herbert Mead, James Mark Baldwin, and Pierre Janet. All four are widely recognized as seminal, early thinkers, yet there is a paucity of contemporary scholarship on the work of Janet and Baldwin, and there is nothing before this book that connects the work of all four. An analysis of the theories of these scholars and the social climate in which they worked will be invaluable to contemporary social scientists.

In their analysis of the social construction of mind, Jaan Valsiner and René van der Veer elaborate on their notion of intellectual interdependency in the development of scientific ideas and the role of such interdependency in the history of the social sciences. They take a new look at how progress in science is a socially constructed entity. Their well-constructed, ambitious volume makes an important and timely contribution to the theory and history of psychology.

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The Social Mind

Construction of the Idea

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Contents

Preface

Introduction: How Can Mind be Social, and Why Do We Need to Mention It?

1 The Development of Ideas in Science: Intellectual Interdependency and Its Social Framework

2 Social Suggestion and Mind

3 Pierre Janet’s World of Tensions

The Nature of Sociogenesis, 2 • Human Psyche as Social, 3 • Reductionism and Consensus versus Construction, 5 • History of Construction Efforts: Toward a Theory of Intellectual Interdependency 8

1 Intellectual Interdependency as Constructive Communication, 11 • Realms of Intellectual Interdependency in Science, 15 • Elaboration of the Roots of Intellectual Interdependency, 19 • Cultural Systems of Knowledge in Construction, 25 • Sciences and Their Self-Reflexivity: The Role of History, 33 • Intellectual Interdependency and “Blind Spots” in Self-presentation, 34 • Summary: Multiple Dialogues of Intellectual Interdependency, 34

37 Hypnosis, Double Consciousness, and Hysteria, 39 • Paris and Nancy Schools of Hypnosis, 46 • Social Suggestion and Crime, 49 • Intercerebral Psychology: Tarde and Le Bon, 53 • Conclusions, 59

61 Janet’s Life Course, 62 • Sociogenetic Themes in Janet’s Writings: The Beginnings, 68 • French Roots of Janet’s Theory of Conduct, 97 • From Neuroses to Obsessions,
vi CONTENTS

101 • Toward a Theory of Conduct, 118 • The Hierarchic Structure of the Mind, 128 • Discussion and Conclusions, 135

4 James Mark Baldwin’s Theoretical Heritage

Baldwin and America: Development of the Thinker in His Social Contexts, 138 • Baldwin’s Intellectual Course, 139 • Sociogenetic Ideas in Baldwin’s Work, 142 • Active Cognitive Processes: Social Mediation of Selectivity, 142 • Play and Art: Where the “Inner” and “Outer” Meet, 145 • The Invention of “Persistent Imitation”: The Constructivist Breakthrough, 149 • Baldwin’s “Simple” and “Persistent” Forms of Imitation, 150 • From Persistent Imitation to “Fossilized Behavior” and Internalization, 154 • Baldwin’s Conceptualization of the “Inner”–“Outer” Relationships, 155 • Baldwin’s Role in the Development of the Idea of “Organic Selection,” 156 • Methodology for the Study of Development: “Genetic Logic” and Its Implications, 157 • Baldwin’s “Genetic Developmental Science,” 158 • Pencalism, 174 • Conclusions: Sociogenetic Ideas and Logic of Development, 175

5 Pragmatism and the Social Mind: An American Context

The Puritan Roots and the Tension between Individualism and Collectivism, 178 • Mutuality of Individualism and Collectivism, 179 • Idealizing Community: An Anglo-American Cultural-Historic Construction, 182 • Summary: The American Focus of Attention on Community and Participation, 191 • The Role of the Philosophy of Josiah Royce within the Sociogenetic Tradition, 192 • Loyalty to Loyalty, 196 • Infinite Potential for Abstraction: Meta-Voices, 199 • William James: A Stream of Ideas Leading to Pragmatism, 200 • John Dewey’s Pragmatism: Dynamic Relatedness, 205 • The Discussion about Emotions, 208 • From the Psychologist’s Fallacy to Coordinations, 220 • Pragmatism and Its Excesses: The Behaviorist Manifesto, 221 • American Sociology and the Social Nature of the Mind, 224 • The Sociogenetic Thought of Charles H. Cooley in Its Context, 226 • Forms of Social Participation: John Boodin’s Elaboration of Lévy-Bruhl, 228 • Charles Ellwood’s Efforts to Delin-
# CONTENTS

1. **Social Psychology from Sociology**, 230 • **Conclusions: American Booming and Buzzing Community Orientation, and Sociogenetic Thought**, 232

6. **George Herbert Mead’s Development of the Self**
   - Mead’s Life, 235 • Mead’s Intellectual Search, 251 • General Conclusions: Mead’s Legacy, 274

7. **Striving Toward the Whole: Losing Development in the Course of History**
   - The Continental European Mindset: The Spirit of the Whole, 278 • Historical Bases for Holistic Thought, 279 • Fateful and Faithful Sciences: Labeling and Its Impacts, 281 • Wilhelm Wundt’s *Völkerpsychologie*: History, Development, and Synthesis, 283 • The Basic Focus: Wholes Are Not Reducible to Elements, 286 • The Austrian Tradition of Holism: Meinong and von Ehrenfels, 287 • The Second Leipzig School: A Focus on Sociogenetic Synthesis, 289 • The Notion of *Komplexqualität* (Complex-Quality), 292 • The Battlefields of Germany: Mutuality of Intolerance, 296 • Productive Research Directions, 299 • Friedrich Sander’s Theory of Vor-gestalten and Aktualgenese, 302 • Microgenetic Methodology: Looking at the Processes of Unfolding, 303 • From Aktualgenese as a Narrow Method to Microgenesis as a General Perspective, 306 • Changing Focus: The Drop-out of Intermediate Forms from Attention, 309 • Transformations of Microgenesis in North America, 312 • Conclusion: Intellectual Interdependency and Socially Constructed Forgetting, 320

8. **Vygotsky’s World of Concepts**
   - Vygotsky’s Life Course, 324 • Theoretical Development, 339 • From Drama and Language to Psychology, 340 • Vygotsky and Comparative Psychology, 347 • Gestalts and Developmental Psychology, 361 • The Cultural-Historical Theory of Higher Mental Functions, 364 • Concepts in Education, 375 • Emotions, 380 • Conclusions, 382

9. **The Social Person Today: Continuities and Interdependences**
   - The Web, 386 • Two Generic Models and Their Synthesis, 388 • Cultural Psychology: Unity of Dialogue, Activity, and
CONTENTS

Symbolic Thought, 389 • Dialogical and Dialectical Perspectives, 389 • James Wertsch’s Dialogicality: Voices of the Mind in Texts, 391 • Activity-Based Theoretical Elaborations, 393 • Guided Participation and Persons’ Immersion in Activity Contexts, 394 • Tools for a New Dimension: Semiotic Mediation within Activity, 396 • Symbolic Constructionist Perspectives, 398 • Speaking through India: Richard Shweder’s Intentionality in Context, 398 • Symbols in Formation: Bernard Kaplan’s Genetic Dramatism, 400 • Kaplan’s Genetic Dramatism – A Holistic Solution to the Problem of the Person, 402 • Representing Socially: Human Beings and Socially Constructed Dramas, 405 • Antiempiricism in Moscovici’s Construction, 406 • Social Representing: Anchoring and Objectification, 409 • Social versus Collective Representations: Generativity versus Ontology, 412 • Ernst E. Boesch’s Symbolic Action Theory, 414 • Conclusions: Open and Closed Nature of Social Construction of Scientific Concepts, 416

Conclusion: Social Mind in Action, the Socially Guided Intellectual Interdependency in Science 419

Two Views on Sociogenesis: Troubles with the Notion of Development, 420 • Intellectual Interdependency and Its Social Guidance, 421 • The Final Note: Guidance for the Sociogenesis of Sociogenesis, 425

Bibliography 427

Index 477
Preface

This book is a result of long-time joint work of its authors. Its idea emerged when the European came to visit his American counterpart, who then lived in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1985. In the process of discovering that in America everything (ranging from milk cartons to Thanksgiving turkeys, and to frequent statements as to how fine everybody is), is bigger than in Europe, the two men decided it would be good to write a book together. The idea to write a general book about the history of the idea that persons are social emerged from their discussions during that visit. Of course they could not think clearly that such a book would be another example of big things. Now, years later (and after jointly writing another major book)\(^1\), the two authors are resigned to their destiny of jointly accomplishing voluminous works.

Indeed, the present book was for years left “on hold” as the authors were busily trying to understand the work of Lev Vygotsky in its complexity, and in its cultural-historical context. That experience alerted them against easy acceptance of various myths that were circulating among the fascinated followers of that interesting scholar. The authors contributed to creation of countermyths about Vygotsky, in the form of pointing to his intellectual interdependency with his contemporaries. From wherever the authors happened to be – Haarlem, Leiden, Berlin, Chapel Hill, Melbourne, Brasilia, Worcester, and elsewhere – emerged their focus on understanding intellectual interdependency in scientific creativity as a whole.

Our inquiry into this topic is somewhere between psychology and

the sociology of science. Similarly to our way of “unpacking” Vygotsky in our previous work, here we attempt to examine the work of Pierre Janet, James Mark Baldwin, and George Herbert Mead. We also zoom in on the curious history of the arrest of methodological innovation that the history of the sociogenetic ideas entails. This topic is important to us. It is sad to see potentially productive ideas of sociogenesis become trivialized by temporary fashions in the thinking of social scientists. As we document in this book, there have been a number of such fashions over the last century, taking somewhat different forms in different countries, and migrating between continents. Fashions remain fashions, they come and go. However, we hope that elaborate understanding of the history of the sociogenetic ideas would help these to stay, and become productive in our knowledge construction.

We want to acknowledge the support of various institutions, as well as help given by a number of colleagues who did not despair of our several drafts, but gave us constructive feedback. The N.W.O. travel grant brought René van der Veer to America, and Jaan Valsiner to the Netherlands. Further support by the Dutch Ministry of Education through the Institute for the Study of Education and Human Development (ISED) sponsored the follow-up visit in 1995. Jaan Valsiner is also indebted to the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung of Germany whose Forschungspreis für Geisteswissenschaften (1995) allowed him to spend an academically productive year at Technische Universität Berlin in 1995–6. The Fulbright Visiting Professorship at the Universidade de Brasilia allowed him to continue the work on the book during his escapes to the southern hemisphere.

Numerous colleagues deserve our gratitude for helping us to clarify our understanding of the complex issues. For Jaan Valsiner, years of collaboration with Robert B. Cairns and Gilbert Gottlieb in North Carolina, and Jeanette Lawrence and Agnes Dodds in Australia, have been important for the incubation of many of the ideas. Ingrid E. Josephs from Otto-von-Guericke Universität in Magdeburg, Germany, has provided constructive input on many of the chapters. Likewise, Leonard Cirillo, Roger Bibace (Clark University), Angela Branco (University of Brasilia), Kurt Kreppner (Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung, Germany), Ivana Markova (University of Stirling, Scotland), and Gert Biesta (University of Utrecht, The Netherlands) have been very helpful in commenting on different parts of the text.
Having finished the big book, we look forward to further inquiry into the history of ideas, and hope that our effort will be of help to those readers who like diving into the complexity of the history of ideas. It is for such sophisticated readers – who do not expect to be given “the final truth” in a persuasive effort, but rather who become our co-constructors of ideas while reading this book – that our efforts have been made. Therefore, we express our gratitude, in advance, to the avid readers of this complex book.

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