EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Socio-Cultural Research

Uniting Culture, Society, and Psychology

Jaan Valsiner and Alberto Rosa

An area of knowledge creation can be said to come of age when it becomes integrated through publishing a handbook. The readers are the beneficiaries of that act, initiated by the Cambridge University Press in recognition of the vastly growing and socially important area. The world is filled with symbolic places in relation to which meaningful actions – tourist trips, pilgrimages, homecomings, war efforts, and the like – are undertaken. New cultural places and myths of their meanings are constructed. Countries as well as spouses quarrel about resources, rights of access to them, and public images. Persons feel sad, angry, or jealous in culturally constrained and personally escalated ways. Our human world, in short, is a culturally constituted world of the relationship of the human species with their constantly re-constructed environments.

Since the end of the 1980s, one can observe rapid development of a synthesis of psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, and medical sciences in the field that has become labeled *socio-cultural psychology*. The roots of this new perspective are deeply in the fertile grounds of everyday social reality. Socio-cultural psychology deals with psychological phenomena that happen because of the socio-cultural aspects of human lives in varied social contexts – peace or war, famine or purposeful avoidance of overweight by dieting, poverty, or affluence. This makes socio-cultural psychology to be a part of human psychology. In parallel, the proliferation of the branch of the social sciences called *cultural studies* has proliferated. As all quickly developing areas, socio-cultural psychology is in need of consolidation of its expertise and creating a solid base for its further development. This Handbook is meant to accomplish these functions.

This present recognition of the area has burgeoning recent history The pioneering effort in the initial promoting of the field was a series of conferences on Socio-Cultural studies (1992 in Madrid, 1996 in Geneva, and 2000 in Campinas), as well as the establishment of the journal *Culture & Psychology* in 1995 (Valsiner, 2001). In its original development, the field of Socio-Cultural Studies was built on the initiatives of Spanish researchers in collaboration with colleagues

all over the World (Rosa & Valsiner, 1994; Wertsch & Ramírez, 1994; Mercer & Coll, 1994; Álvarez & del Río, 1994; Wertsch, del Río & Álvarez, 1995). The field of cultural psychology was developed in parallel both in Europe (Boesch, 1989, 1991; Eckensberger, 1995, 1997) and in North America (Cole, 1990, 1996; Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Shweder, 1990; Shweder & Sullivan, 1990; Wertsch, 1991) and is notably interdisciplinary in its focus. No surprise, given such cosmopolitan history, that the present Handbook is profoundly international,[1] with a slightly Mediterranean accent. Added to it is the notable activity theory movement that since 1960s has proliferated in former Soviet Union, East Germany, Denmark, and other European countries and has led to the establishment of ISCAR – and we can see how the socio-cultural perspective has become a prominent force in contemporary social sciences.

Why Such Complex Term – *Socio-Cultural* Psychology?

Why invent (yet another) hyphenated term in the already labels-rich field of the social sciences? General labels that present an area of knowledge are means of communication with others – outsiders to the field – who are expected to provide an audience to the ideas covered by the label (and, of course, social and economic support for the promoters of that label). The new label presents the synthesis of sociological ("socio- . . . ") and anthropological (" . . . -cultural") research traditions with those of psychology. However, the label is as generally vague as its constituents on both sides of the unifying hyphen.

Culture is a term that operates easily at the common language level of discourse, but proves difficult to define as a scientific term. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) listed 164 definitions, and since then the number of yet other nuanced definitions of the term has further increased. Culture has traditionally been the subject matter of anthropology. Yet, ironically, it is precisely at the time – 1990s – when psychology re-discovers culture – that cultural anthropology becomes skeptical of the theoretical value of that concept. Likewise, the general notion of "society" in sociology is an imprecise term that unifies many researchers in their direction of focus – but has no explanatory value (Valsiner, 2007).

Psychology is the science of ambiguous kind. It is on the one hand oriented to the study of mental processes (which are most directly accessible in the *Homo sapiens* in contrast to other species), and its effort to make sense of other species have regularly relied on the focus on behavior. As human psychological functions are a result of cultural history intertwined with phylogeny of the species, we can observe some of such phenomena in some other animal species. At the same time, the long process of emergence of human psychological functions in the history of the species is not directly accessible to our investigation. Instead, psychology usually deals with the already emerged forms of the conduct of our contemporary representatives of Homo sapiens. They are fully social – in the sense of their dependence upon the social contexts they create for themselves. Yet they are simultaneously uniquely personal – subjective, affective, and individually goals-oriented.

There is little doubt that speaking, communicating, and higher forms of reasoning, remembering and attending cannot be understood without taking into account social life and, in the case of humans, also show the consequence of the use of cultural devices. But, what about human feeling, perceiving, desiring, performing motor acts and all other forms of behavior? Where can we draw the boundaries between the natural and the cultural? Or – do we need to make such distinction at all? How can this new direction in research build up its conceptual framework that can open new methodological directions for the social sciences? The very frequently uttered (and "politically correct") notion of interdisciplinary nature

of sciences would remain an empty phrase unless such new directions are created.

Directions of Inquiry in Socio-Cultural Psychology

Psychology is no longer a juvenile science with a long history in philosophical thought – as Ebbinghaus once claimed. It is a matron science well past its first century of life, and besides all its cyclical ailments, enjoys a very good health, if one looks at its institutional grounding. And – as we show in Chapter 1 – it is also a bastard science that was born as an illegitimate baby to a tumultuous and temporary union of philosophy and *Naturwissenschaften* in the 1870s.

Psychology has of course led to recurrent deconstruction efforts of its theoretical core, as well as to various efforts to eliminate the discipline by downward (to physiology, or genetics) and upward (to texts, cultural models) reductionism. It is certainly not too difficult to eliminate a science by denial of its object of investigation – the *Psyche*. Yet it is clear (see Chapter 1) that reductionist sentiments cannot win in psychology – they can only slow down its development. If a parallel is worthwhile making – psychology in the 21st century can be in a state similar to 17th century chemistry, where painstaking work led to slow replacement of alchemy by science. Much of contemporary psychology – especially in its applied side of "prediction of future" by test scores, and the mystiques of therapies, resembles the actions of alchemists.

However, matters may be different if one looks inside and try to look for what Vygotsky (1926) called "the skeleton" – the core concepts and methods that make sense of the phenomena observed. It is this internal theoretical structure – that acts in a science as analogs of the bones, joints, and muscles – which make it possible to keep upright and move with grace in order to display its products in an intelligible discourse able to describe and explain, with an acceptable level of accuracy, what is going on in reality. This aesthetics of scientific explanation is similar to Einstein's ways of relating his theory with the experimental evidence – instead of the crude accountant's belief in the accumulation of "the data" solving our problems, it is the sheer elegance of crucial empirical evidence that forces the theory constructor to ask for specific empirical studies.

Vygotsky's metaphor – and Einstein's credo – are not easily applicable to the current social sciences where *methodlatry* is still in fashion. It protects itself – it is no longer the case – that once methodological parlance is removed, the knowledge offered collapses in a mass without shape, as happens in mollusks (once their external skeleton is removed). Psychology has devised many methods (often presented as "standardized") and created many constructs as well as developed many applied techniques that are put in use in many different areas of modern life. If their use in social practices proves their adequacy then the selection notion ("survival of the fittest") is put to its ultimate test since it stops further invention.

The Conceptual Map of Socio-Cultural Psychology

The family of perspectives to which the label *socio-cultural* is currently being applied is a result of various historical dialogues within psychology, sociology, and anthropology. Hence it is not a theoretically coherent group, but rather heterogeneous kind. It looks as if it is unified as a concept – yet it is actually a conglomerate of similar, yet not mutually coherent, perspectives (see Slunecko & Hengl, Chapter 2). Their unity comes through their contrast with non-social (individual-specific, or subjective) ways of looking at human beings. The emphasis on "the social" permeates the discourses about "the individual," or "the *Psyche*" (see Chapter 1). Focus on language – which unites persons into language communities – is often taken as the basic human defining feature that is both personal and social at the same time.

Within the complex of the socio-cultural approach, we can distinguish a number of directions:

1. The discursive/conversational tradition (see Castro & Rosa, Chapter 3). This tradition can be viewed as operating at different levels of generality – from macro-social (different discourse types present, or developing, in the history of the given society) to micro-social (analyses of specific discursive phrasing of issues in everyday talk or interview transcripts – see Edwards, 1997). The analysis of conversations – of interpersonal moves using language for particular purposes – borders on this discursive complex (see Hamo and Blum-Kulka, Chapter 20);

2. The semiotic mediational approach. Here the focus is in the construction and use of meanings – created or adopted. Its nearest neighbors are the tradition of social representation (see Slunecko & Hengl, Chapter 2, and Duveen, Chapter 26) and the focus on dialogical nature of the self (see Salgado & Gonçalves, Chapter 30). Simultaneously, the tradition of social representing is a bridge to the macro-social discursive *foci*.

3. The activity tradition. While the previous perspectives emphasized the cultural embeddedness and constructivity of the *Psyche*, the activity-theoretic perspectives focus on the direct mutuality of the persons and their socially organized settings (see Cole & Engeström, Chapter 23). Of course, the action environments of human beings (as well as primates kept in humanized conditions – see Fields et al., Chapter 8) include semiotically marked areas and objects, and people do talking during their acting (as captured by the micro-discursive approach). The symbolic action theory of Ernst Boesch has for decades united the activity and semiotic perspectives (Boesch, 1993, 1997, 2005).

4. The evolutionary readings of cultural histories. Our contemporary psychology is increasingly infested by stories told about how it might be that we as Homo sapiens became as we now are – attached to TV screens, eating freedom fries, and worrying about almost anything we can worry about. Of course the use of evolutionary psychology's explanation of how higher functions of the *Psyche* emerged includes substantial involvement of literary cheating – the stories told need to be not just plausible but also shocking. Yet when the excesses of evolutionary journalism are overlooked, the issue of emergence of cultural meanings and action tools in specific ecological conditions is a necessary and productive sub-field of the socio-cultural research field (see Serrallonga, Chapter 9).

Does this mean that all provinces of psychology belong to the realm of socio-cultural psychology? We believe this is not the case. The study of perceptual illusions, psychophysics, and some forms of learning – to mention just a few examples – do not need to take into account the socio-cultural as a part the phenomena under study. Even if perceptual processes may be fully immersed within the field of symbolic stimuli of cultural kind – like national flags or costumes at festivals – psychology as a whole cannot be lost in the sea of socio-cultural psychology. The type of explanation to offer to these basic psychological phenomena has to be devised in such a way that it can permit a developmental explanation of the transitions between natural basic phenomena and the higher psychological functions of intentionality, without the need of falling in the Scilla of reductionism, or the Caribdis of dualism (for a more detailed argument, see Travieso, Chapter 6).

The reality of all complex biological, social, and biological systems entails the emergence, maintenance, and (at times) demolishing of hierarchical regulatory systems. In case of human psychology it is the capability for willful, intentional actions that is crucial for human living. We experience as we try to move towards some objectives of the future, and may try again, and again – while creating stories in the middle of the ongoing processes of failing to reach

our utopias. These stories give color to our striving – experience is movement towards the (yet) unknown on the basis of our narrated personal histories.

Cultural Experiencing of Social Worlds

A theme that multiple authors in this Handbook touch upon is the centrality of human experiencing of the world. Socio-cultural psychology specifically deals with the psychological phenomena that result from the interpretation of experience, and so it deals with meaning-making, the co-construction of knowledge and its keeping and transformation along time. So – there exists a socio-cultural domain that can be distinguished from other psychological phenomena – and that can be investigated in its own right. These phenomena of the socio-cultural domain cut across the boundaries of what currently are diverse psychological sub-disciplinary fields. Thus, we take socio-cultural psychology to be both a part of psychology devoted to the study of psychological phenomena, and a way of going into new ways of doing psychological research. It is neither a separate discipline, nor has it any imperial claims over the rest of psychology.

What is more, socio-cultural research goes well beyond the limits of psychology, penetrating in the field of the social sciences and the Humanities. Socio-cultural psychology dwells in a sort of hinterland between the natural and the cultural. Or, to be more precise, it deals with matter and also with the spirit, or, if we want to exorcise such dangerous word, with that thing German idealists called *Geist* (spirit). As German was the first language within which psychological issues became discussed, the role of the contrast between *Geist* and *Seele* (soul) is of importance. The "spirit" is immaterial – it is not a thing, an entity. It is a process of experiencing our relations with our worlds.

Psychological experiences – not encoded in terms of either "soul" or "spirit" – exist in different animal species, as the so-called instinct of "curiosity" allows us to observe. The impulse to finding out what kind of thing something "is," and that also produces "surprise" or "fear" when it is found out that has been misunderstood for another, that a mistake has been made. Earliest emergence of sign-mediated relations with the environment can be non-linguistic, yet crucial for living (von Uexküll, 1982; see also Fields et al., Chapter 9). This same phenomenon of mediation of experience takes a different shape in humans. It may make one to understand what words such as "justice," "freedom," or "loyalty" refer to; or what to be Christian, Muslim, Japanese, or member of a class or group "means," to what standards of virtue, honor, decency, or ethics has one to stand up to. Or, referring to more down to earth matters, how to make sense of what is going on in a ritual, or how to understand the movements and sayings of an unfamiliar person coming from a distant culture whose etiquette is unknown to us.

Socio-Cultural Psychology – Its Past, and Needs

It may be relevant to note that Psychology became first institutionalized as a Science of the Spirit, as a *Geisteswissenschaft*. Official histories of Psychology usually fail to tell that the first chair of Psychology (that bore the title of *Völkerpsychologie*) was created in 1860 at the University of Bern for Moritz Lazarus (Jahoda, 1993). He was also the editor – together with Heyman Steinthal – of a journal with the same title, that survived until the beginning of the 20th century. As it is well known *Völkerpsychologie* was also in the title of a series of books written by Wilhelm Wundt (1900–1920). The thematic areas of our present-day socio-cultural psychology were covered a century ago by folk psychology and language studies, as well as by ethnology.

As history tells, the new – calling itself "scientific" – psychology started from experiments on psychological phenomena carried out in physiological laboratories from the 1860s onwards. Wundt's *Grundzüge der Physiologische Psychologie* (1st edition 1873) set the ground for the development of experimental psychology, that was already

announced by Hermann Lotze's *Medizinische Psychologie, oder Physiologie der Seele* (1852). For Wundt, Experimental Psychology was a natural science (*Naturwissenschaft*), but never thought that the psychological realm could be exhausted by the use of this approach. He agreed with Lazarus, and also with Wilhelm Dilthey, that it also had to be a "science of the spirit" (*Geisteswissenschaft*). He also went into the pains of offering some epistemological guidance (*Logik*, 1883, 1908) of how to transit from one kind of explanation to another (Jahoda, 1993). It could be said that since these times psychology has failed to integrate the *Naturwissenschaft* focus of its basics with the specifically higher-order phenomena of the *Geisteswissenschaft* kind. The latter were prominently kept in focus by the line of psychological thought that proceeded through the work of Franz Brentano.

THE PROBLEM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

It is usually in the case of phenomena of consciousness that the integration between these two approaches has traditionally failed. Consciousness is the most central of psychological phenomena. No science could exist without empirical verification, and empirical experience is the product of the processes that produce consciousness. These processes are the result of the movements of a natural being in its environment. Conversely, subjects' behavior cannot be studied without the empirical experience of the observer. Since both, subjects and observers, are human subjects a sort of tautology seems to appear. Unless consciousness already exists, the study of consciousness (of the others, or of one's own) is not possible.

EVOLUTIONARY THOUGHT AND UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Darwinism understood humanity as a product of biological evolution (Fernández, 2005; Richards, 1987, 2002). William James's pragmatism applied to psychology a Darwinian approach and set the ground for an evolutionary psychology that attempted to explain all psychological phenomena from biological principles, as Thorndike, Woodworth and the Chicago functionalists started to do. Instincts, drives, and motives came forward as devices for the explanation of intentions and meaning (see Danziger, 1985, 1990, 1997). Later on behaviorism resorted to conditional and associative reflexes, the Law of Effect, or a combination of both, to explain how biological needs were the basis upon which social values were learnt, and how the two together could account for the explanation of goal-directed behavior – that was how meaning was portrayed in its more extreme mechanistic views.

Evolutionism had widespread effects on the sciences, psychology, and culture at large. One of them was the development of a new way of understanding the structure and functioning of the nervous system, where psychological functions were taken as having its origin. A British physician, John Hughlings-Jackson, mediated in the polemic between locationists and anti-locationists, offering an evolutionary view of its structure and functioning. This view set the stage for the development of new conceptions such as those of schema (Henry Head, 1926; Bartlett, 1932), and functional organs and functional systems, developed in Russia by Piotr Anokhin (1964) and Alexander Luria.

DUALISMS (AND FIGHT AGAINST THEM) AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL IMPASSES

For quite a long time psychology seemed to be caught in a quandary. It looked as if it had to opt for one kind of explanation *or* another. There was a self-imposed choice – whether to be devoted to the understanding or the vital experiences of individuals, or to discover general laws. The former choice was aimed at understanding particular individuals, leaving aside any attempt of general explanation. The second led to the search for universal explanatory principles that would account for all of the observable behavior. Making choices between these options led psychology to no new solutions – as the inter-individual variability in the empirical domain made it impossible to inductively

arrive at generalizations, and the in-depth understanding of the single cases were not expected to provide general knowledge.

As is the case with many *impasses* in science, it is the creation of mutually exclusive opposite categories – "body" *versus* "mind", or "singular" *versus* "general" – that block the road to substantive discovery. It is more than ironic that heated disputes against "dualisms" in psychology recur – insisting usually upon one or another kind of monologic reduction of the complexity to one preferred causal entity (e.g., "person" *or* "the environment," "genes" *or* "the society," etc.) – while it is axiomatically obvious that all psychological phenomena are in principle possible only through the constant process of relating with the environment (i.e., are open systems). Hence, we can consider "the mind" as a generic counterpart of a relation to "the body" – it is the latter that makes all the phenomena of "the mind" possible, as well as becomes modified itself through the vicissitudes of "the mind" as the experiences of anorexics, ascetics, and committers of suicide demonstrate. The "body/mind dualism" is therefore an axiomatic impasse for psychology, while its systemic alternative – *duality* of "the body" and "the mind" as parts of the same whole – could lead to new conceptualizations.

A similar transposition of the opposition idiographic <> nomothetic is in order. Generality of knowledge in psychology is obtainable through the study of particular cases in their systemic organization (Molenaar, 2004; Valsiner, 2006). The fruitful beginning of differential psychology as part of general investigation (Stern, 1911, 1935) has eroded over the last hundred years to become a field of indiscriminate "study of individual differences". A synthesis of the study of unique phenomena in conjunction with general theoretical goals provides us a new version of science – idiographic science (Molenaar & Valsiner, 2005) – that transcends the "*either* general *or* particular" ethos of the previous dichotomy. Dualisms of all kinds are obstacles for science – but so are also fights against dualisms that deny the dualities embedded in systemic parts <> whole relations.

THE PROBLEM OF MEANING – BETWEEN PARTS AND THE WHOLE

Meaning was the hard nut to crack if one were to bridge the Cartesian abysm. And so it was repeatedly attempted by some. *Geist* had to be the result of what happened in the body as a consequence of its encounters with the rest of the world. If these encounters produced sensations and feelings, these had to be either associated, or in some mysterious ways combined (e.g., Wundt's *creative synthesis* and *apperception*) to account for the appearance of abstract ideas or new understandings and thoughts.

Not surprisingly this explanation did not satisfy many, and new approaches were attempted. Action theory enthusiasts – the newest generation of whom one finds also well represented in this Handbook – emphasize the unity of experience. That unity is a form – a dynamic one. Following the course traced by Franz Brentano, Carl Stumpf, Hans Cornelius, and Christian von Ehrenfels advanced the discourse about *Gestaltqualität*. Form, irrespectively of its sensory qualities, keeps being perceived as the same, as it happens when a melody changes pitch, when every one of the sounds that together make the melody, are changed, but the mutual relationship among them keeps constant. In order to explaining this phenomenon, two directions in holistic psychology developed.

First, there were the different Gestalt traditions – the Berlin-based Gestalt Psychology, and Leipzig-based *Ganzheitspsychologie* (Diriwächter & Valsiner, 2007) – where scientists started to think in terms of structuring fields – and borrowing elements of physics, referred to forces, valences, and dynamic equilibria within the field of consciousness, which was taken to be isomorphic with the material/external realm. So, understanding, insights and coming to terms with the encounters with the world, were results of reaching a balanced stable equilibrium. Meaning was a result of this underlying process analogous to physical phenomena. It appeared as a sudden insight of understanding how to act – hence broke the equilibrium – to be embedded in new ones. In contrast, the "Austrian school" of Gestalt

discourse – rooted in Brentano but involving Alexius Meinong and his intellectual offspring from the "Graz School" of psychology. Christian von Ehrenfels, and Heinz Werner emphasized the emergence of "higher order forms" in our holistic relating with the world (Karkosch, 1935; Smith, 1988). In any organized – and self-organizing – system the notion of hierarchical order is a basic general axiom on which to build new theories. That order may involve few – or many – levels, be transitive or intransitive (Valsiner, 2006) – it can take a multitude of forms. It can combine *loci* of strict and fuzzy forms of organization within itself. Yet that kind of order is there in a socio-cultural phenomenon, and the task of science is to find out how it functions.

SOCIO-CULTURAL THOUGHT AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF SOCIETY

Ideas usually develop on the shoulders of gigantic social turmoil within societies – wars, revolutions, economic instabilities. World War I and the subsequent revolutions in Russia, Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Germany provided a crucial new beginning for socio-cultural thinking.

Following the Russian revolution of 1917, dialectical-materialism and dialectical-historicism became the official philosophy of the new Soviet state. Materialism, together with historical consciousness, were central concepts not be neglected. The institutional turmoil of the country made possible that young scientists (during a brief period) could produce novel approaches with the tools of knowledge they had available. Following a critical review of the psychology of the time by a number of young thinkers – Lev Vygotsky, Alexander Luria, Mikhail Bakhtin, and others – culture, history, and biology were interconnected within an approach that combined the idea of internalization (taken from psychoanalysis) with that of mediational tool (based on the account of anthropogenesis given by Friedrich Engels) and an evolutionary-developmental approach that combined phylogenesis, history and ontogenesis. This amounted to the emergence of the *cultural-historical school* of Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

Precisely a similar turn in psychology was prepared at the same time in post-revolutionary Austria where Karl Bühler published his classic work on *Die Krise der Psychologie* (Bühler, 1927/2000). This direction was carried forth by the Prague Linguistic Circle (where Bühler was one of the members). Meaning was taken as a central category, but coming mainly from the internalization of language and its use in communication and collective activities. Consciousness became then a result of the internalization of (*social*) communication with semiotic materials (*cultural*), accumulated along the (*historical*) past of the cultural group, and so capable of planning ahead and transforming the future. Social, cultural, and historical became the adjectives to be put together with the noun psychology, in the banner that signals this school of thought, that also has Luria's neuropsychology as one of its important contributions.

Curiously enough, *meaning* and *semiotics*, being central concepts of this way of approaching psychology, are taken for granted and are not either defined or explained in the abundant production of those who are usually taken to be main flagholders of this way of approaching psychology. From both Vygotsky's and Bühler's verdicts on their contemporary psychology we learn about a clear scenario for the future – focus on meaning-construction processes. Such focus was supported by developments in the study of language functions.

DEPENDENCE ON LANGUAGE

Language seems to have been taken as the only way of dealing with meaning and sense. The development of linguistics, and philosophy of language throughout the 20th century has influenced psychology profoundly. Following Saussureian structural linguistics, meaning was taken to be a result of reference, but also a product of the syntagmatic nature of language. Grammatical structure was taken to be the grinding mill for the production of meaning. As Wittgenstein pointed out, any system of knowledge has to

be stated in a language capable of capturing the essentials of observational statements, and later on, concluded that everything that we could know about the world was a result of playing with words. Any kind of knowledge, and consequently all our experience, was a result of the language games we play. The linguistic turn was taking shape.

There are two related disciplines that have meaning as its subject-matter: *semiology* and *semiotics*. Their difference in name would deserve an explanation that would go beyond our purposes here. *Semiology* originates from the work of the Genevan scholar Ferdinand de Saussure, and *semiotics* from the contribution of the American logician Charles S. Peirce. Both take the study of signs as its primary focus, but the first soon concentrates in conventional symbols and language, while the second goes into developing a general theory of signs in the form of a semiotic logic. Saussure's legacy has left a deep mark in psychology. For example, Jean Piaget's structuralism is not foreign to the structural logic derived from it, in addition to the indirect influence via linguistics that was alluded above. On the other side, Peircean semiotics have fared rather differently. Appreciated by the best scholars of his time – James Mark Baldwin and William James – but disliked by academic institutions, Peirce left a sophisticated legacy in terms of his semiotics that is being carefully utilized over a century later. Using logic and mathematics as his starting point, he introduced a classificatory system of signs that is useful in our time (see Chapter 10).

By the end of the 20th century the focus on language started to change. No longer were researchers investigating syntax or even semantics of words, but a focus on whole messages (utterances) in the contexts of conversation and discourse became highlighted. Also the meaning of *discourse* started to change. Earlier it had been referring to processes of argumentation and thinking, but now it came to mean the type of speech production – oral or written – which resulted from the language games used in social activities. These language-games, as could not be otherwise, had to do with social practices, and therefore carried with them power relationships, hidden mechanisms for including or excluding, for valuing or degrading, and so had the capability of shaping the view of the world of any one who became an user of such device (Foucault, 1972). Since there is no other way of making sense of an experience that putting it into words, and words are connected among themselves in a grammar, and also have to be uttered in a discursive form, then there is no way of avoiding using the discursive tools available.

Alternatively, one could say that it is the language (or discourse, or the social structure, etc.) that "uses" a human individual to speak in a particular context. So viewed, meaning resides in social discourses and literary genres that circulate in societies. This theoretical stance turns the social abstract units – texts, discourses, institutions, ideologies – into purposeful and active agents who *act through* the persons. Thus, if one wanted to study a particular meaning, one can easily go for a visit to its "residence" in texts (as cultural historians or literary critics do), or try to capture it when the meanings are wandering from one mouth to another – at a distance (if one plays some of the games of discourse analysis). Persons are merely "carriers" of the agency of social units – in apparent parallels with the promotion of different religions that emphasize the deities' "speaking to" the persons through specific moments of communion.

An opposite move – although not fully contradicting the former – has also been utilized. If one can only make meaning through language, and speaking is the result of the use of bodily structures – a two-way relation is present. Using language is not only an act of vocal movements – or of the expression of scripts–but also an application of rules on how to perform those movements. Why not accept that we all share both – the corporal structures ("hardware") and the rules for their use (the "software")? The history of encounters with the environment (including other members of the species) would then account for these vocal, brain, and cognitive foundations that now come to all us as a free birth gift from evolution. This view,

under the assertive powers of Chomsky and Fodor (among many others), has an appeal for those who long for the comfort of a Platonic ideal of truth embodied in the trinity of the world, language and cognitive structures. After having been rubbing against each other throughout the eons of evolution, by now, if properly analyzed their study can show us "the truth" of "how things really are". Namely the true meaning of things is assumed to be already encoded in language, in the brain, and in the cognitive structures. So, it is as if, looking beyond all the sophisticated parlance used, we were gliding back to the beginnings of modernity, to Descartes, and in a new looping towards the past, to Plato and the eternal forms of being.

Whatever the case, the Cartesian rift has proved itself difficult to be crossed. Attempts do abound, but they seemed to be bridge-constructions started from one side, that somehow do not seem to set firm ground on the other. It is as if Auguste Comte's curse on Psychology – explanation of human affairs can only be either in its material or its social nature, but never in the middle of both – had haunted the discipline from before its birth. Reductionism – either physical-biological or social-cultural – becomes the norm for explanations. In this book we hope to overcome that norm.

EMBRACING SEMIOTICS

Contemporary socio-cultural psychology is navigating from activity theories towards semiotics. The latter is of course not new – yet long neglected. This is no moment to go into the deployment of hypothesis about the reasons for this long neglect on taking into account Peirce's contribution for the benefit of psychology (see Houser, 1992; Menand, 2001; Riba, 1995). Whatever the case, a revival of Peirce seems recently to be taking effect in different realms: Philosophy (Apel, 1975; Innis, 2005), biosemiotics and zoosemiotics (Hoffmeyer, 1997a. 1997b; Riba, 1990; Sánchez & Loredo, 2005), and Developmental Psychology (Rodríguez & Moro, 1994). The revisiting of some early contributions of this discipline, that otherwise has also enormously influenced linguistics, with the creation of pragmatics, and its subsequent influence on Psychology (e.g., Bruner), may help to address the second question stated above – whether we can approach the study of meaning and experience before language, in animals and children. If that was the case, we would be in the path that Saussure signaled when he said that the study of why something can come to be a sign, and how does it happen, is a matter that concerns psychology, not semiology. Peirce's Semiotic Logic may be a useful tool for this purpose (Peirce, 1896, 1935, 1982). Chapter 8, 10, 12, and 14 go into the exploration of some of its possibilities.

The Pre-View of the Handbook

This Handbook covers a wide field of contemporary research fields, that are situated in different disciplines – psychology, sociology, education, philosophy, political science, and anthropology – and which strive to build interdisciplinary links. However, as will be evident from the following chapters, building such bridges is not an easy objective. Each of the chapters shows the tentative nature of moving outwards from one's base discipline, towards the domain of the unknown and often untrusted of other disciplines, or of different areas of social practices. As a result, our Handbook – appropriately to the field as it exists nowadays – covers a heterogeneous and multi-voiced discourse. This heterogeneity gives us the trust in the (still) developing nature of the field.

In Part I of the Handbook – *Psyche, Society, and Culture* – we examine the effects of cross-disciplinary collaboration in the creation of this new form of knowledge. It also offers reflections on methodological and theoretical issues, as well as opening new views for future developments. We set up the stage for systematic inquiry of different features of human lives. The myth of the life history of the *Psyche* (Chapter 1) illuminates our way through the savannas of the multitude of socio-cultural approaches.

As will be clear from Chapter 1, the perennial question of causality remains a