The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology

This handbook provides a representative international overview of the state of our contemporary knowledge in sociocultural psychology – as a discipline located at the crossroads between the natural and social sciences and the humanities. Since the 1980s, the field of psychology has encountered the growth of a new discipline – cultural psychology – that has built new connections between psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, and semiotics. The handbook integrates contributions of sociocultural specialists from 15 countries, all tied together by the unifying focus on the role of sign systems in human relations with the environment. The handbook emphasizes theoretical and methodological discussions on the cultural nature of human psychological phenomena, moving on to show how meaning is a natural feature of action and how it eventually produces conventional symbols for communication. Such symbols shape individual experiences and create the conditions for consciousness and the self to emerge; turn social norms into ethics; and set history into motion.

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The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology

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Contents

Preface ix
Contributors xiii

Editors’ Introduction: Contemporary Social-Cultural Research: Uniting Culture, Society, and Psychology 1
Jaan Valsiner and Alberto Rosa

PART I: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

1 The Myth, and Beyond: Ontology of Psyche and Epistemology of Psychology 23
Jaan Valsiner and Alberto Rosa

2 Language, Cognition, Subjectivity: A Dynamic Constitution 40
Thomas Slunecko and Sophie Hengl

3 Psychology within Time: Theorizing about the Making of Socio-Cultural Psychology 62
Jorge Castro-Tejerina and Alberto Rosa

4 Sampling Reconsidered: Idiographic Science and the Analysis of Personal Life Trajectories 82
Tatsuya Sato, Yuko Yasuda, Ayae Kido, Ayumu Arakawa, Hazine Mizoguchi, and Jaan Valsiner

PART II: FROM NATURE TO CULTURE

5 The Windowless Room: ‘Mediationism’ and How to Get Over It 109
Alan Costall
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>From Orientation to Meaning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Acts of Psyche: Actuations as Synthesis of Semiosis and Action</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alberto Rosa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Time and Movement in Symbol Formation</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Silvia Español</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Object Use, Communication, and Signs: The Triadic Basis of Early Cognitive Development</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cintia Rodríguez</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Network of Meanings: A Theoretical-Methodological Perspective for the Investigation of Human Developmental Processes</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M. Clotilde Rossetti-Ferreira, Katia S. Amorim, and Ana Paula S. Silva</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Symbolic Resources for the Constitution of Experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Dramaturgical Actuations and Symbolic Communication: Or How Beliefs Make Up Reality</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alberto Rosa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Analysis of Cultural Emotion: Understanding of Indigenous Psychology for Universal Implications</td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sang-Chin Choi, Gyuseog Han, and Chung-Woon Kim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>The Role of Symbolic Resources in Human Lives</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tania Zittoun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Perpetual Uncertainty of Cultural Life: Becoming Reality</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emily Abbey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Prayer and the Kingdom of Heaven: Psychological Tools for Directivity</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pablo del Rio and Amelia Álvarez</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>“Myself, the Project”: Sociocultural Interpretations of Young Adulthood</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jeanette A. Laurence and Agnes E. Dodds</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>From Society to the Person through Culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Apprenticeship in Conversation and Culture: Emerging Sociability in Preschool Peer Talk</td>
<td>423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michal Hamo and Shoshana Blum-Kulka</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONTENTS
vii

21 The Creation of New Cultures in Peer Interaction
William A. Corsaro and Berit O. Johannesen 444

22 “Culture Has No Internal Territory”: Culture as Dialogue
Eugene Matusov, Mark Smith, Maria Alburquerque Candela, and Keren Lilu 460

23 Cultural-Historical Approaches to Designing for Development
Michael Cole and Yrjö Engeström 484

24 Money as a Cultural Tool Mediating Personal Relationships: Child Development of Exchange and Possession
Toshiya Yamamoto and Noboru Takahashi 508

25 The Family: Negotiating Cultural Values
Nandita Chaudhary 524

PART VI: FROM SOCIAL CULTURE TO PERSONAL CULTURE

26 Culture and Social Representations
Gerard Duveen 543

27 The Institutions Inside: Self, Morality, and Culture
Piero Paolicchi 560

28 Identity, Rights, and Duties: The Illustrative Case of Positioning by Iran, the United States, and the European Union
Fathali M. Moghaddam and Kathryn A. Kavulich 576

29 Symbolic Politics and Cultural Symbols: Identity Formation Between and Beyond Nations and States
Ulf Hedetoft 591

30 The Dialogical Self: Social, Personal, and (Un)Conscious
João Salgado and Miguel Gonçalves 608

PART VII: MAKING SENSE OF THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE: MEMORY AND SELF-REFLECTION

31 Social and Cognitive Determinants of Collective Memory for Public Events
Guglielmo Bellelli, Antonietta Carci, and Giovanna Leone 625

32 Collective Memory
James V. Wertsch 645

33 Issues in the Socio-Cultural Study of Memory: Making Memory Matter
David Middleton and Steven D. Brown 661

34 The Social Basis of Self-Reflection
Alex Gillespie 678

General Conclusions: Socio-Cultural Psychology on the Move: Semiotic Methodology in the Making
Alberto Rosa and Jaan Valsiner 692

Index 709
It is taken for granted that any existing disciplinary field must have handbooks readily available for its students and researchers. This is the first *Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology* to appear with such a title, and so its appearance acts as a sort of landmark for its official constitution as a field. But no volume can give birth to an area of research, at the most it can only signal the crossing of a threshold. When shaping such a volume what the editors do is to surf above the agitated surface of disciplinary tides, making figures which make apparent the force of waves of researchers who have been gathering strength from a long time effort.

Social and cultural life are indissociable from the threads which make up the fabric of the human *Psyche*. The very forefathers of Psychology did not fail in acknowledging this. However, their early insights and contributions were left aside from the mainstream of a fast-growing Psychology. Psychology was quick in recognizing Psyche’s biological and social roots but took its time in setting itself into the inquiry of how culture shapes human psychological processes and how cultural change (History) leaves its traces on the working of the mind.

As in any other up-growing contemporary disciplinary field, Socio-Cultural Psychology was a curiosity – it branched out of many traditions of research and received many names. Most of them gather the adjectives Folk, Cultural, Social, and Historical besides the name Psychology in different combinations. Whatever way one chooses to call it, there was always a common concern for the psychological study of distinctly human psychological phenomena, but without losing sight that human phenomena are themselves always also natural and biological.

The very nature of the research field of Sociocultural Psychology makes it a branch of the psychological sciences that continuously needs to cross the disciplinary borders and to collaborate with the social sciences and the humanities. So, to call for a specialised field of Sociocultural Psychology is a sort of oxymoron. Sociocultural Psychology cannot leave aside anything that is human; its challenge is to address its complexity and provide tools for its explanation.
and understanding. Sociocultural Psychology is both a field of Psychology and a cross-disciplinary endeavour. That is why empirical work has always to be hand in hand with a theoretical concern always shuttling across disciplinary boundaries. Vygotsky’s claim for a general psychology was an early demand for not losing sight of the complexity of the task when going into a particular research project.

A handbook always attempts to present as completely as possible the field it covers by gathering significant contributions. This has to be done by selecting topics and authors so that a Gestalt of the state of the field can be made to appear. This no doubt is a result of the choosing of the editors who, when so doing, are making an interpretation of the past and present of the discipline, but also cast a message conveying their view about promising possible future developments of the field. An argument, running through the volume as a whole, so arises. And, as it could not be otherwise, sketches a structure of sub-areas, hints to continuities, but also makes apparent gaps and inconsistencies which signal challenges to the future. The result is a figure arising from a patchwork better or not as well knit together. A community of researchers should not be confused with a corporation of logistics only concerned with fast transportation through well-paved roads, so that goods can be speedily made available to the destination market. Researchers are explorers, not caravaneers. If they keep together along well-trodden paths, celebrating being together when traveling, they may enjoy themselves, but they would not make much service to the expansion of knowledge of the field. Orthodoxies may have some advantages when penetrating in a foreign field but can become a deleterious trap when one wants to go deeper into it. An advised traveler pays more attention to the landscape than to the road. But when doing so, a price has to be paid: either one travels slowly paying homage to the rules of the road, or one may crash. When so doing, one behaves as a sort of tourist, taking pictures which are very much like postcards already available in kiosks. The real thrill is in leaving the road, making new paths as moving on the land. But this also has a price. The journey is uncertain and solitary, one may get lost, and perhaps nobody else would find interesting to visit that part of the realm, so that no road (method) would ever be developed to cross through it. Researchers have to balance between getting credit from moving fast along the communication lines for the commerce of knowledge (orthodoxies) and the more risky business of opening new vistas on the phenomena to study.

The authors here gathered are explorers and road builders so the knowledge they produce could be shared. Some are well seasoned and enjoy ample credit, but all of them together, when sharing with us their views, make us contemplate a vista of directions to explore and feel invited to use their methods to go further ahead in our journey. They together form a variegated company coming from different corners of the world, engaged in exploring their disciplinary areas, speaking many different languages, always attentive to what is going on beyond their immediate neighborhood, and eager to enter into dialogue with the others. They were enthusiastic in joining this common enterprise and
made the editors feel obliged to them for making the task of putting together this volume both a challenge and a pleasure.

This handbook, as any other human enterprise, has its own history. Its birth was summoned by Philip Laughlin who – with Cambridge University Press – foresaw the actuality of the area and suggested that the time had come to set up the field with a definitive handbook. Eric Schwartz followed Philip in equally enthusiastic support. We are also deeply grateful for the careful management of the production of the book by Peter Katsirubas, of Aptara, Inc., whose detailed suggestions and work with high-quality copy editors made the editing process a great pleasure. A team of enthusiastic assistants also participated in the editing process. Ignacio Bresco, Marcela Lonchuk, Tomás Sánchez-Criado, Irina Rasskin, and Silviana Rubio dealt with the tedious task of checking references and manuscripts.
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