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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Preface

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 knitted together. Roads should not be confused with the landscape. They just scrub on its surface and may leave aside blank spaces in the map, sometimes so much ignored that may not even have the mark terra ignota written upon them. A community of researchers should not be confused with a corporation of logics 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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