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Jaan Valsiner and Rene van der Veer

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Introduction

How Can the Mind Be Social, and Why Do We Need to Mention It?

Language may be compared with the spear of Amfortas in the legend of the Holy Grail. The wounds that language inflicts upon human thought can not be healed except by language itself. Language is the distinctive mark of man and even in its development, in its growing perfection it remains human perhaps too human. It is anthropocentric by its very essence and nature. But at the same time it possesses an inherent power by which, in its ultimate result, it seems to transcend itself. From those forms of speech that are meant as means of communication and that are necessary for every social life and intercourse it develops into new forms; it sets itself different and higher tasks. And by this it becomes able to clear itself of those fallacies and illusions to which the common usage of language is necessarily subject. Man can proceed from ordinary language to scientific language, to the language of logic, of mathematics, of physics. But he never can avoid or reject the power of symbolism and symbolic thought. (Cassirer, 1942, p. 327)

This book is about human rigid creativity. At first glance, such a formulation seems to be a contradiction in terms. Isn't it the case that creativity is the opposite of rigidity? Yet, the history of humans' understanding of themselves indicates that these two sides of reflection go together: New ideas about what we are like are invented, and then rigidly applied to ourselves. It is as if any invention of a term or concept is both liberating and enslaving at the same time (as was already stated by Von Humboldt; see Chapter 8). By its invention, a concept allows for a new way of organizing understanding. However,

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its immediate implications also make the position that the concept entails rigid. This happens in everyday life, and it also happens in science.

More specifically, we are interested here in the ways in which new ideas in the social sciences have been made rigid through social means. The basic sociogenetic credo, that human personal-psychological functioning is a social process, has been invented, and has become a popular slogan in the social sciences. Yet slogans do not make science: They may help to get a head start, but then their role will be lessened for knowledge construction. In numerous biological and physical sciences, the invention of loose metaphors has been liberating for the knowledge construction process. But this can't be said about the social sciences, and psychology, in particular. There may be social reasons in these disciplines for wariness of loose metaphors. Yet by avoiding the play with such metaphors, psychology has turned into a stern, uninventive discipline, in which the the right ways of acquiring knowledge suppresses the potential for major intellectual breakthroughs. By such singing to the Kuhnian tune of normal science forever, psychology may eventually commit intellectual suicide as a discipline. We will examine the social processes of construction of ideas in psychology based on the example of sociogenetic concepts.

The Nature of Sociogenesis

In this book, we are interested in charting out what implications the meaning complex *the human mind/psyche is social* has for basic knowledge construction in the social sciences. More specifically, we take a cultural-historical look at the uses of that meaning complex during the formative years of psychology, roughly delineating our coverage of the period from the 1880s to the 1930s. Of course, our historical analysis is aimed at rejuvenating contemporary knowledge construction at the turn of our own century. As in our previous work (e.g., Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991), we have tried to pave the way to that goal through detailed analyses of the history of ideas and their sociocultural contexts. We look at different versions of the sociogenetic tradition in the social sciences.

This tradition has been built around two basic postulates (see Valsiner, 1989, p. 43). The ontological postulate is a claim that all human psychological processes are social in their nature. The developmental postulate emphasizes the idea that human personality emerges

through social experience. Hence the notion of sociogenesis, the social genesis (i.e., development, emergence) of the person.

The sociogenetic tradition in psychology and other social sciences has made episodic appearance on the scene of the drama of science. At times (like our 1990s, or likewise a hundred years ago, in the 1890s) it was actively discussed. At other times, it was hushed up in favor of the dominance of the biologically deterministic perspectives. But it has returned. The waves of emphasis on social (in contrast to biological) deterministic beliefs has its societal repercussions. Not surprisingly, the sociogenetic perspective has flourished in contexts in which the given society has been in a phase of social upheaval, with hope for its basic change into a new (and better!) state. Sociogenetic ideas in the social sciences have thus been rather silent corevolutionaries (or comutineers, depending upon the position of the evaluator) to other efforts to change society. In contrast, at the historical phases of relative stability and fixation of social system, the biological determinism with its implications (e.g., differences between persons are predetermined by nature). Hence the complex of ideas of sociogenesis has closeness to the social processes within society that makes it into a good target for our analysis of intellectual interdependency (see Chapter 1).

Not only are the processes of constructing ideas about the psychology of human beings interdependent between different scientists, but they may be parts of the nebulous social contexts (of the given society at the particular historical period, such as Soviet Russia and Germany in the 1920s, the United States in the 1890s, Spain in the 1980s) that create the background guidance for the particular theoretical inventions by the scientists. Social discourse between scientists about a particular subject matter is embedded in the social context within which these scientists live. They may find that the result of their work transcends the confines of their time and their own background. Again, the process of arriving at these results is socially embedded.

Human Psyche as Social

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, it has again become acceptable (even fashionable, see Chapter 9) to consider human psychological functions as social in their nature. Often this position is simply declared by brief, but frequently glorifying, references to thinkers from the past who held such a position. Oftentimes, the names of

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Lev Vygotsky, George Herbert Mead, and others are used to emphasize the social nature of human psychological functions. Declarations of faith are, of course, often made in conjunction with evoking an authority figure: “as X (e.g., Vygotsky, Mead, Tom Sawyer, Marx) showed, the mind is A (e.g., social), and not B (e.g., biologically determined).”

However, it is often an open question as to what functions such declarations can have in science. From a position of in-depth analysis, such statements seem merely to be stating the obvious (compared with statements like the rain is wet or the rich are affluent). And yet, such general claims about the sociality of the human psyche are made with remarkable vigor and repetitiveness; thus their function cannot be merely descriptive. Rather, repeated claims about the social nature of the mind are part of some ongoing social discourse in science. These claims are about a fight for positioning the researcher in relation to the object of investigation. Furthermore, it is not only the researchers’ positioning of themselves (for which some kind of repeated prayer, uttering to oneself “the mind is social,” might suffice), but efforts to position other researchers into their viewpoint, that seem to underlie the repetition of this simple idea. Efforts are being made to persuade others to accept the productivity of looking at the human psyche as if it were social. Thus, many of the contemporary sociocultural, cultural, and sociogenetic orientations in psychology carry with them a missionary spirit: to persuade the world that their viewpoint is the “right” one.

Of course, there is always some persuasive (rhetorical) role embedded in scientific discourse. Galileo’s well-known claim that the earth moves around the sun had more rhetorical than knowledge-creating functions. Yet it is in the twentieth-century social sciences, with their widened realms of discursive relations, that the rhetorical functions of general scientific assertions begin to acquire centrality, and at times dominate. The latter is particularly evident in cases in which some social institution attempts to take over some area of science. This has happened in various ways in the history of sciences. For example, the Soviet system in the 1930s and 1940s attempted to take over the social sciences (Valsiner, 1988) and genetics (Dobzhansky, 1955). The result was that for some decades, the knowledge-constructive activities of scientists were replaced by active rhetoric assertions about the “righteousness of the Soviet science” in contrast to its international counterpart. But such a socioinstitutional takeover need not occur solely from the side of political systems. It can be observed in the institutionalizing

of a particular knowledge-construction device (e.g., statistics as one of many forms of inductive knowledge constructions) and getting it to take over the social sciences as if it were the “scientific method.” The latter, of course, is a rhetorically constructed role, which is set to operate as a starting position of no doubt (e.g., the internal heterogeneity of statistics is hidden in order to create the monolithic methodological imperative; see Gigerenzer et. al., 1989).

Obviously, there are many varieties of institutional takeovers of disciplines. Our examples here tap only into some of these. Yet the general principle remains: By combining power and persuasive or declarative rhetorics, a social institution can work toward appropriating a particular science to its needs (of control, elimination, transformation, application, or enhancement). The relationships between a science and a society are multifaceted, and far from the mutually benevolent recognition of each other’s value.

The rhetorical role of general (axiomatic) positioning claims becomes maximized under conditions of a need for negotiating a science’s role in the social matrix of different sciences in a society. At times, a particular discipline can become a playground for power games played by the rules of social bureaucracies or religious orthodoxies. But the terminology used in these games need not differ from that of knowledge-constructing science. For example, there is a delicate difference in implications between two interpretations:

(A) *The mind is social*, and therefore we proceed to study it in ways X, Y, Z;

in contrast with

(B) *The mind is social*, and therefore it is not true that it is *not social*, or that it is of any other nature.

The first interpretation opens the door for new inquiries into the specifics, while the second leads to intergroup warfare between the proponents of one or another position. In the first case, the new generic meaning (“social”) opens to us a realm of new possibilities to look at the phenomena. The second interpretation closes opportunities for new ways of looking at the mind, as it eliminates our possible doubt as to the position.

Reductionism and Consensus versus Construction

Without doubt, our interest is in the first interpretation. Our cultural-historical analyses in this book are undertaken with a goal of finding out how different sociogenetic thinkers of the past tried to move from

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the general statement of the mind's social nature to actually investigating it as such. They did it in their own unique ways, some being caught in the pleasures of rhetorical declarations, others in the difficulties of descriptions of the individual and the social at the same time. Yet the major themes around which the construction of sociogenetic ideas revolved remain interestingly constant. First, there is the axiomatic preference for fusion (of person and the social environment) or inclusive separation (i.e., the person is viewed as distinguished from the environment, yet interdependent with it) bases for sociogenetic models. Theoretical constructions following the former may idealize the communion of the person and the social context. They are likely to deny the individuality of the person within the social context, and are often based on implicit sociomoral stance about the person necessarily setting the priorities of the social world ahead of one's own. In fact, the existence of the latter may be denied, or if not denied, considered to be a social aberration (e.g., some persons might not show sufficient membership in the society). These perspectives do not need concepts like internalization and externalization, and find notions of participation and appropriation sufficient for their conceptual needs.

In contrast, sociogenetic theorizing based on the inclusive separation basis emphasizes the personal individuality as the demonstration of the social nature of the person (see Chapter 4). Theoretical constructions from this basis are likely to emphasize the notions of internalization and externalization, and to doubt the imperative that persons should merge themselves within social units through giving up their personal uniqueness.

Thus the crucial question is: How to construe persons as being social without abandoning their obvious personal autonomy, separateness from any social unit (group, crowd, community), while being members of such units. The conceptual imperative of the commonsense "either-or" thinking holds scientific terminologies in its iron grip. Sociocultural thinkers often counter the tendencies of explaining psychological phenomena by their underlying biophysiological substrate (reductionism "downward") by reducing the complexity of personal psyches to social-explanatory constructs (texts, discourse, narratives, culture; i.e., reductionism "upward"). Both versions of reductionism are similar in their construction features. An alternative theoretical route is to make sense of the ways in which the person and social units actually relate. In contemporary sociocultural theorizing,

disputes about internalization/externalization, appropriation, mastery, guided participation, etc. abound. All these indicate efforts to overcome the limits of the either-or thought model that is firmly entrenched in human everyday language. This problem was paralleled in the social sciences of the beginning of the twentieth century. As Vincent critically elaborated,

A mere enumeration of terms and phrases brings up a panorama of theories: 'social growth', 'social evolution', 'the general mind', 'co-operation', 'coercion', 'social control', 'contact', 'contract', 'consciousness of kind', 'the dialectic of personal growth', 'the social self', 'the looking-glass self', 'the social nature of conscience', 'the dialectic of social growth', 'imitation, opposition, invention', 'the individual an abstraction', 'social consciousness', 'the social mind', 'the persistence of social groups', 'the role of unconsciousness', 'the cake of custom', 'the folkways' and 'the mores', 'instinct and habit', 'psychic planes.' 'mob-mind', 'like-mindedness', 'conflict and rivalry', 'group struggle', 'social selection', 'survival value', 'crisis', 'adaptation', 'the elite as the social brain', 'making up the group mind', 'the social process'. To one who knows the field these ideas are familiar, many of them commonplace. At first they may seem fragmentary and detached; but they quickly arrange themselves into something like order and unity. (Vincent, 1910, p. 469)

Efforts to make sense of the personal as social have been around a long time, and have generated a multivoiced discourse for the social sciences. Perhaps such overdetermination by meaning (to use Boesch's, 1991, terminology here) has been an obstacle for solving the problem. Very easily, many partly overlapping concepts are disputed within a scientific community as to which of these terms explain the phenomena better than others. The focus here is on the evaluation of the attributional value (or symbolic adequacy) of one or another complex meaning as explainer. Some of such meaning complexes are ruled out as valid scientific explanations from the outset (e.g., "ancestors' spirits"), yet others (of a not necessarily less mythical nature, like "libido") are considered possible (if not preferable). Still others may be prioritized in the discourse of scientists at a given historical time (hence the needs by proponents of the sociocultural perspective for the rhetorical repetition that *the mind is social*, in contrast to their opponents equally rhetorical claim that the mind is innate/personal). What is being discursively constructed, and reconstructed, is the consensual acceptability of one or another symbolic means of explanation. Whichever consensual solution is reached will not automatically lead

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to new knowledge construction. The latter cannot happen on the basis of consensus about general causal entities, but requires the building of a systemic explanatory system “downward” from the general axiomatic position, toward the empirical phenomena. Thus, discursive construction of a shared position in a science can be a starting point for a productive research program. Yet whether such productivity follows from discursive negotiation of the position, or not, does no longer depend upon that position per se, but on how it is used for making sense of the reality. Thus, the winners of the rhetorical battlefields of science may lose the whole war, which is fought not against opponents, but against the ever-elusive nature of the reality of the objects of our investigations.

History of Construction Efforts: Toward a Theory of Intellectual Interdependency

In this book, we attempt to continue the line of developmental analysis of ideas that was earlier applied to the case of Lev Vygotsky (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). We try to trace the construction and elaboration of the idea that the human psychological system is social in the work of four main authors of the sociogenetic kind: Pierre Janet, James Mark Baldwin, George Herbert Mead, and Lev Vygotsky. In order to demonstrate how their particular ways of conceiving the texture of the sociality of the mind emerged in their life contexts, we analyze relevant other directions of thought that constituted the background for their work. The historical period we cover – roughly designated as that of five decades, from the 1880s to the 1930s – is meant to capture the period of the emergence of various elaborations of the social concept of the human psyche. However, aside from analyzing the concrete development and transformation of ideas, we address a more general issue that faces anybody who tries to make sense of development of ideas: the intellectual interdependency of the author of ideas and others whose activities are relevant for these ideas. Furthermore, the ill-defined (and perhaps in principle undefinable) notion of the intellectual atmosphere, or *Zeitgeist*, of a historical epoch may direct different authors toward identical or similar new discoveries. In its focus, the present approach is a sociogenetic look at the notion of the sociogenesis of the psyche in the social sciences. In this, self-inclusiveness is both the pleasure and pain of our analytic efforts. We concentrate on the complex ideas that have been used by proponents

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of sociogenetic ideas, as these reflect the realities of human personality. At the same time, we situate the thinking of these promoters in their sociohistorical contexts. Intellectual interdependency – as we have labeled the mutual constitution of ideas between scientists and societies – is thus a meta-level sociogenetic process itself. Only here what emerges in social discourse and actions a view on the persons becoming personal through social experience. Notice the absence in the English language of an appropriate generic term that could capture the whole of the psychological functions, or psychological processes. We here revert to the use of *mind* as a convenient analogue for psyche, yet the mind carries a rationalist connotation that is not assumed by us.

CHAPTER ONE

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

In this chapter we outline a general scheme of *intellectual interdependency*. Our coverage of the issue is based on the assumption that new understanding of phenomena in science is actively constructed by intentional persons, who are involved in a field of mutually communicable meanings, or ideas. Within this field, persons act in a goal-oriented manner: communication is directed toward personally desirable possible future state of affairs. Each of the persons is unique, and constructs knowledge from the basis of personal uniqueness, yet in ways that are related both to the interpersonally communicable ideas, and to the nature of the object world of the given science. These persons are also members of different social institutions, and assume social roles that are set up by these institutions. Thus, we try to make sense of a threefold relation: – *social institutions, scientists, nature* – of the object of the given science. Our focus in the latter case is the issue of humans (scientists) making sense of fellow humans. This is the crucial epistemological problem for the social sciences, where the distance between the subject and object of investigation is essentially absent. A social scientist who looks at another person (or social phenomenon, like social class, gender, etc.) inevitably can't escape the obvious fact that the roles of the researcher and the research participant are always close to being reversible. It often happens that the research subject investigates the thinking of the researcher, while not providing much evidence about one's own. Thus, the researcher is constantly under the uncertainty about his or her control over the research encounter. Furthermore, the closeness of the researcher and the research participant makes it easy to project into the other one's implicit assumptions about perspectives that can be taken (or ought to be taken, from the researcher's viewpoint) upon an object of inves-