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978-0-521-58973-4 - The Social Mind: Construction of the Idea

Jaan Valsiner and Rene van der Veer

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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.

Jaan Valsiner is Professor of Psychology at Clark University.

René van der Veer is Professor of Education at Rijksuniversiteit Leiden.

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
 São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
 32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521589734

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First published 2000

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
 Valsiner, Jaan.

The social mind : construction of the idea / Jaan Valsiner and
 René van der Veer.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-58036-6 (hb). – ISBN 0-521-58973-8 (pbk.)

1. Intellect – Social aspects. 2. Intellect – Social aspects –
 History. 3. Discoveries in science – Social aspects.

4. Inventions – Social aspects. I. Veer, René van der, 1952– .
 II. Title.

BF431.V25 2000

302—dc21

99-28458

CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-58036-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-58973-4 Paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2010

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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 – Harlem, 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

¹ Van der Veer, R., & Valsiner, J. (1991). *Understanding Vygotsky: A Quest for Synthesis*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

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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.

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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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