

## Editors' Introduction

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# Sociocultural Psychology on the Move

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The first edition of this *Handbook* (Valsiner & Rosa, 2007) is now ten years old. At the time it was first published, we mentioned that its publication could be taken as a landmark of the consolidation of a discipline. Looking back now, we can say that we were right, as the notion of culture is now widely conceived and has been on the rise over the last decade (Van Belzen, 2010; Chirkov, 2016; Chiu & Hong, 2007; Glăveanu, 2016; Sullivan, 2016; Valsiner, 2007, 2014). Sociocultural psychology is one of the branches of cultural psychology and has as its focus the socially normative nature of the wider cultural context within which a person relates to the world through specific sets of meaningful actions. The focus on meaningfulness of human action – through semiosis (making and use of signs) – is shared by sociocultural psychology and cultural psychology.

During the past decade, sociocultural psychology has both consolidated and expanded in many directions. This is noticeable, first, by the publication of several handbooks on cultural psychology – indicating the interest in culture and social psychology (Kitayama & Cohen, 2007) – and, second, by the richness of various streams in cultural psychologies (Valsiner, 2012). Additionally, the field's move toward cultural historical psychology (Yasnitsky, Van der Veer, & Ferrari, 2014) summarizes perspectives of the whole field that have developed out of the historical traditions of Lev Vygotsky (Zavershneva & Van der Veer, 2017) and Alexander Luria. Some volumes have been written as textbooks aimed at students (Heine, 2008; Voestermans &

Verheggen, 2013), others as theoretical volumes aimed at scholars (Valsiner et al., 2016). This has been paralleled by a growing body of books and journals devoted to publishing theoretical and empirical contributions. The social science arena that utilizes the notion of culture in one way or another is experiencing a “booming and buzzing” creativity that may provide new breakthroughs in our understanding of human living in the tumultuous social world filled with the disappearance of knowledge into the agitation of doctrines, drone attacks under the aegis of “protection,” battles against “terrorism” that feed into fears and unleash xenophobia, and – last but not least – the globalization of consumption-focused societal ideologies. The waves of social turmoil are like tsunamis in social media – making social upheaval a more complex threat than nuclear weapons have ever been. The sociocultural perspective is likely to dominate the current social favorite, the “neurosciences,” which, despite their promises to cure disease, cannot alter the social pathologies of the societies in which people participate. The future is for the social sciences – given that the societal escalations of the contemporary world cross the boundary of calm tolerance and risk slipping into sectarianism.

## The Birth of the Second Edition

In the present, seemingly never-ending flow of academic publications, it is a special honor if a book appears in new editions – all the more if the idea is initiated by someone other than the authors or editors. Cambridge University Press's

suggestion to produce a second edition of the *Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology* came as somewhat of a surprise – but it was certainly timely. The field had grown in the decade since the first edition, and so have our understandings of it. We are now in a position to guide further development of the discipline – a task to be taken up both humbly and determinedly. We are creating a sculpture out of the clouds, a book that gives form to the flow of ever-new ideas – whether ingenious, repetitive, or mundane. Our aim is to isolate the ingenious ideas from the many others.

We decided on an overhaul of the original idea by introducing a meta-structure of ideas not yet developed 11 years ago. As a whole, this is a completely new volume. True, some of the contributions from 2007 have been preserved in altered form, but our approach to the *Handbook* as a whole is new. It now expands the views on experience and development that appeared in the first edition; at the same time, it shifts its scope by paying more attention to how particular cultural artifacts and social practices shape experience and behavior throughout the lifespan. The “socio” component of the title points toward the volume’s base in cultural objects, while actions on these provide the focus for the present *Handbook*. In the wider field of social sciences, where psychology as a discipline is vanishing into the black hole of the neurosciences, this second edition of the *Handbook* preserves the sociocultural aspects of psychology through an interdisciplinary synthesis.

## Real Interdisciplinary Synthesis

It is through interaction and communication in particular scenarios, often in conditions of ambiguity and ambivalence that challenge the actor to position himself or herself, that cultural artifacts (tools, symbols, images, discourses, norms) are put into use and transformed, sometimes in a creative way. Not only are these kinds of situations occasions for producing novelty but

they also show how personal experiences produce individual development and are a source of cultural transformation. This makes understanding (meaning making of subjective experiences) a key theoretical issue.

Different disciplines help one another. Semiotics and literary criticism offer explanations not only about how sign systems turn into symbols and utterances but also about how experiences can be considered signs for orienting action and canalizing actions. A semiotic theory of human experiences and actions that addresses how actors understand and perform in situations offers formalisms capable of modeling how personal experience and behavior are linked and is instrumental in explaining how social representations are elaborated, put into use, and transformed.

This set of theories images a dynamics of sociocultural and personal life in which time and developmental constructive transformations are crucial. Education and development; mastering and transforming meditational tools through play, imagination, and art; and stabilizing changes through symbols, discourses, and practices make it possible to establish aesthetic and ethic systems of values and, with them, shared forms of feeling, knowledge, and social institutions. The mutual co-construction of psyche and sociocultural systems shapes particular forms of identity and the self, which, together with cultural systems of beliefs, produce varieties of personal experiences that cannot be ignored when considering civil and personal governance.

## In This Volume

Sociocultural psychology is a discipline with blurred limits that intersects with other psychological subdisciplines, the social sciences, and the humanities. It is therefore important to chart the network of theories that informs and links its corpus of knowledge. Action, artifact, and meaning are key concepts with a long history within the

sociocultural tradition. They have proved to be useful for explaining the transitions between the realm of culture to those of behavior and subjectivity. Several theories, when taken together, can provide an integrative image of how such transitions can happen without falling on any kind of dualism or reductionism.

Part I is devoted to the theoretical and methodological issues that frame the contents of the volume. It starts with a parsimonious naturalist overview of how the human psyche gets shaped in processes that begin in the bioecological domain, then produces meaning and mind, and, finally, the spirit of culture. As Rosa and Valsiner (Chapter 1) explain, human beings are a cultural species that cannot but live in a semiosphere. Such a view leads Salvatore (Chapter 2) to conceive psychology as a science of sensemaking and to present a semiotic-cultural framework for human psychology. This has far-reaching consequences in both the psychological and the epistemological realms. Sammut, Bauer, and Jovchevitch (Chapter 3) demonstrate that what we take as objective or subjective cannot be conceived without taking into account how social communication iteratively transforms experience and coordinates social relations. Costall (Chapter 4) argues that an ecological psychological approach, even if social and semiotic, does not need to resort to a representationist kind of cognitive mediation. The general framework presented in Part I prompts Rosenbaum (Chapter 5) to discuss the similarities and differences between cultural psychology and interpersonal psychoanalysis and how the theories can benefit from one another.

Enactive autopoietic constructivism offers a dynamic view of how the co-construction of functional structures in an agent, when acting within an environment of objects, allows the production of explanations capable of transitioning from the biological to the social realm via the mediation of artifacts and sign systems. Ecological psychology, actor-network theory, and the systems of activity theory are theoretical

approaches that take into account how material and virtual objects are graspable in human action and integrated in networks of actants, institutions, and discourses, and so are able to describe how the structure of actions gets transformed and new cultural products and novel ways of social interaction appear.

In such a vein, Part II focuses on how human action in the environment simultaneously produces perception and meaning and transforms elements of the environment, producing artifacts, social conventions, symbols, and arguments. Rosa (Chapter 6) examines how the semiotic properties of behavior and experience can explain the production of artifacts and conventions and the transformation of human agency through social history and ontological development. Wagner, Kello, and Rämmer (Chapter 7) focus on how social communication produces shared social objects of many different kinds, ranging from concrete material elements to abstract entities, such as global warming or national identity. Miettinen and Paavola (Chapter 8) explore artifacts and semiotic tools as intertwined elements within the changing dynamics of systems of activity. Glăveanu (Chapter 9) discusses how sensemaking and interpretation, evaluation and use, and dialogue and perspective taking in the dynamics of the relations involving the triad of actor, artifact, and audience can expand the scope of creativity studies. Finally, Zittoun (Chapter 10) discusses how imagination and “symbolic resources” are key elements for human development, the shaping of personal life courses, and also societal changes.

Part III is devoted to education and development. Español (Chapter 11) presents a convincing argument about how early motor development and body awareness develop together in early forms of social interaction. It is on the vitality forms of movement so developed, that the child can participate in the social world of conventional symbols and arguments. Social interaction, mediated by objects (toys) in different play

situations, transforms movement and body awareness into conventional cultural uses of objects and early cognitive development. In their chapter, Rodríguez et al. (Chapter 12) discuss the development of canonical uses of objects that is a pragmatic link for the later acquisition of cultural concepts. The self is one of these concepts. Gillespie (Chapter 13) conceives the self as arising from the phenomenological experience of self-reflection, when one becomes an object for oneself. As Nelson (Chapter 14) views it, meaning-making processes simultaneously develop different forms of memory and self-awareness when the child accumulates experiences while participating in different levels of human culture and related language formats and uses. Development and education are then inconceivable without being immersed in sociocultural dialogues. Matusov (Chapter 15) examines the notion of dialogue in education, distinguishing between two kinds of dialogical pedagogy: instrumental, aiming at making all students arrive at some curricular end points preset by the teacher and/or the society, and non-instrumental, expecting students to arrive at new curricular end points that cannot be predicted in advance. This movement between what already exists in the life of a person and what could come into being in the next moment prompts Marsico (Chapter 16) to conceive education and development as liminal and future oriented, constantly working on the border of the “beyond area,” moving through the semiotic boundaries between social institutions.

Part IV elaborates these ideas further by focusing on how value develops within institutional settings. Faigenbaum (Chapter 17) presents a view on moral development by reviewing the development of ownership, exchange, and reciprocity in children’s institutional experience. In a similar vein, Yamamoto and Takahashi (Chapter 18) explore money as a cultural tool mediating market and gift exchanges among children – examining the cultural meanings money

takes within varieties of relationships between children and parents or friends.

Part V shifts the volume’s focus to the study of aesthetic and religious experiences. Artifacts, rituals, and texts of different kinds are outcomes of human action constructing the cultural landscape. They provide arguments for shaping individual experiences, the personal understanding of individual and collective life, and the position they take when experiencing events. Freeman (Chapter 19) argues that aesthetic transcendence cannot be conceived without sociocultural values, beliefs, and ideals incited by particular local objects. Cresswell (Chapter 20) challenges the idea of “natural” religion as beliefs emerging as epiphenomena of cognitive mechanisms and presents an alternative approach that addresses the givenness of religious belief without predicating on socioculturally decontextualized mechanisms. Martínez Guerrero (Chapter 21) argues that while psychology presents religion as a key cultural phenomenon for understanding the organization of people’s daily experiences through the use of its symbols, rituals, and discourses, the reverse can also be said: religion played an important role in shaping both the contemporary Western individual and the psychological categories for its description. This is exemplified by examining Ignatius of Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises* as a milestone in the configuration of subjectivity and the government of emotions in the modern subject.

Part VI centers on how cultural resources shape identity, placing particular emphasis on the role historical narratives play in interpreting past and current events in conflict management and in civic life. History and historical narratives are cultural devices that provide information about the activities of a group over time and also produce aesthetic and moral feelings toward different groups. Tateo (Chapter 22) develops a theoretical model of the psychological processes that produce abstract and intangible concepts, such as “nation,” “love,” “faith,”

or “freedom,” that allow for contact with particular objects in everyday experience, to act as allegorical representations of those abstract concepts. Carretero, Van Alphen, and Parellada (Chapter 23) present historical narratives as tools for scaffolding feelings of collective and personal identity and therefore also as instrumental for instilling ethnic and nationalistic ideologies, but they also argue that history education is an occasion for fostering critical reflection on social life, as a defense against ideological indoctrination. Wagoner, Awad, and Brescó (Chapter 24) explore the social–political dynamics by which the past is represented and used by differently positioned people and how alternative interpretations arise before the displayed symbolic weaponry to preserve one’s own ideological position. In a similar vein, Leone (Chapter 25) highlights how historical accounts can keep conflicts alive, unless their capability for producing feelings of superiority and grievance or guilt and vengeance is defused. This requires building a narrative of reconciliation, which often needs to change the aesthetic and moral arguments on which the groups and their members’ identities are conceived – not an easy task. Part VI concludes with Castro-Tejerina and Loredó-Narciandi’s (Chapter 26) reflection on the role of psychology in shaping the Western idea of citizenship – what they term *Psytizen-ship*. As they view it, postmodernity is forging a repsychologization of the subject that is necessarily conflictive and plural.

Part VII is the final and longest part in the *Handbook*. It is devoted to examining a variety of personal experiences and the shapes they take throughout the lifespan. Salgado and Cunha (Chapter 27) offer a view of human experience as arising from a dialogue between the self and feelings. They approach the experiential mind by combining the phenomenological, sociocultural, and semiotic outlooks. As they present it, the flow of human experience combines first-, second-, and third-person perspectives, with affectivity crossing over these three layers and

therefore acting as a core element within the dynamics of the human mind for the institution of the sense of selfhood. Sargan, Pfefferkorn, and Abbey (Chapter 28) conceive experience as resulting from a future-oriented process based on overcoming the ambivalence between what is known now and what might be the case in the next moment. Their chapter focuses on the social and societal roots of ambivalence and the means of overcoming ambivalence within the process of constructing meaning when facing the quandaries of life.

The construction of the personal realm is a challenge for sociocultural psychology. Køster and Winther-Lindqvist’s (Chapter 29) contribution centers on the individual dimension of personal history by distinguishing between the preverbal, prereflective embodied landscape of experience (historical selfhood) and personal history as the broader ontogenetic and existential process through which an individual continuously becomes the person he or she is. This makes embodiment the point of transfer between nature and culture, sociogenesis and ontogenesis, and also relevant for the development of individual agency. Hviid and Villadsen (Chapter 30) also claim the importance of taking into account children’s development as persons. They present an empirical study on children’s meaning-making processes while in dialogue with cultural elements in the living spaces where they experience events. These self-reflecting experiences, when assembled with the workings of imagination on cultural material, can be turned into tools for shaping one’s own actions and, eventually, one’s own self by setting a life project.

The rest of the chapters discuss how adults understand their lives and experiences when in contentious situations. Guimarães and Benedito (Chapter 31) present an empirical study on how indigenous Brazilian university students experience tensions between the way of life and ethnic–cultural values of their communities of origin and those of life in the urban context and academic

institution. Madureira (Chapter 32) presents a discussion on gender identities as resulting from cultural canalization by rigid semiotic boundaries separating what is perceived as masculine from the feminine. The last chapter is a study on aging, which Ferring (Chapter 33) approaches by combining two points of view: from without and from within. It starts with a discussion on the differing qualifications that the term *aging* has received in diverse theoretical models and then goes into particular biographic narratives that highlight the importance of life events and adaptive processes within the family in the subjective construction of the self and the life course. The general conclusion (Chapter 34) elaborates on a person-centered approach in the study of human aging that takes into account how family and culture interact in shaping life in advancing age.

## Conclusion: Directions in Sociocultural Psychology

Sociocultural psychology is a discipline that deals with change and diversity in social life, in collective and individual conduct, and in personal experiences. It is a disciplinary field of knowledge whose theories have to be devised in such a way as to be able to explain regularities but also account for individual variation. It is a kind of idiographic science in which the understanding of individual observation is grounded on nomothetic principles able to explain how human action in concrete settings is the result of an agency distributed in a system involving biological, social, and cultural elements.

Sociocultural psychology is a liminal field of knowledge crossing the paths of other disciplines. These disciplines feed the knowledge they produce, but this knowledge cannot simply be added together in an eclectic mass. No “big data” can solve basic problems in any science – least of all in psychology. Sociocultural psychology has to keep moving to produce integrative theories to relate new findings from the neighboring disciplines in order to develop its own research.

This is accomplished through carefully considering the complexities of methodology (Branco & Valsiner, 1997; Valsiner, 2017). Methods taken out of context of the wider methodology cycle do not guarantee meaningful knowledge, as effective theories are needed.

However, at the same time, sociocultural psychology should avoid attempting to provide definite and comprehensive accounts of the phenomena it studies. Such accounts are necessarily partial – they are meaningful from some theoretical perspectives and meaningless from others. For example, the majority of psychological data that are statistically analyzed in psychology as solid data may at best be considered “anecdotal” from any sociocultural psychology perspective. Why? There is no evidence in statements like “men were found to be different from women at the statistical criterion of conventional ( $P < 0.05$ ) level” that may be based on large samples. Such evidence fits the gossip columns of journalists who are watching for socially scandalous findings from psychology, but they do not provide new insights into the phenomena under study. A careful, in-depth study of a particular man (or woman) within his (or her) immediate activities context and of the guiding framework of the social norm systems of society would provide solid evidence. Generalization in psychology is not only possible but also the rule in psychology as science (Valsiner, 2015). Consequently, psychology is similar to all other basic sciences where a phenomenon under study is unique – a comet, a planet, or an asteroid to which the human engineering genius might send a landing robot for the study of its particular qualities. Yet, the evidence of such particulars is of crucial importance for our general understanding of our universe. Such understanding is abstract and general, and it has potential for contextualizations in other particular locations.

Nevertheless, sciences of the human *psyche* transcend the disciplines that deal with physical and biological objects. A special feature of our perspective is the *self-reflective nature* of human



beings – as it is reflected in sociocultural psychology. We need to keep ourselves aware that the discourses it produces are but the transitory construction of a kind of interobjective knowledge resulting from the operation of a dynamic system of distributed agencies. Scientific knowledge is itself a cultural product that results from human efforts to respond to the quandaries of life – if it does not change as the dynamics moves, it becomes stagnant and useless both for general knowledge and for practical applications in societies.

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