

BETWEEN SELF AND SOCIETIES

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Jaan Valsiner

**BETWEEN SELF
AND SOCIETIES**

CREATING PSYCHOLOGY
IN A NEW KEY

Edited by Maaris Raudsepp

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Jaan Valsiner

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INTRODUCTION

Jaan Valsiner is one of the founders of the re-birth of cultural psychology at the end of the 20th century. Among many varieties of cultural psychology, which all focus on the meaningfulness and cultural nature of psychological phenomena, he has initiated and is developing a cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics, providing thorough theoretical innovations to psychological science.

Since 2013 Jaan Valsiner is the Niels Bohr Professor of Cultural Psychology at Aalborg University in Denmark, where he leads Europe's first Research Centre on Cultural Psychology. In the years 1997–2013 he was affiliated with Clark University at Worcester, MA and in the years 1981–1997 to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (USA). He has been a visiting professor in several universities in Brazil, Japan, Australia, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

In Estonia he has close relations with the University of Tartu (from which he graduated in 1976 and where he started his scientific and pedagogical career before leaving the Soviet Union in 1980) and Tallinn university (where he started his graduate studies in 1969). Since 2008 he has been an honorary doctor of Tallinn University.

The motivation behind this book is twofold: firstly, to bring to light some “forgotten” papers. Despite the abundance of production (over 40 books and 400 articles and book chapters), Jaan Valsiner still has a lot of unpublished texts. We made a selection of these papers to provide glimpses of Jaan Valsiner's unique theoretical insights and the broad scope of his research interests—from analysis of historical trajectories of science and macro-social institutional processes to the micro-level analysis of psychological meaning-making. Our second aim is to highlight Jaan Valsiner's own reflections on his scientific interests and developmental trajectory. Retrospective

comments and interviews published in this book uncover his unique personal perspective.

Behind my constantly changing and multiple interests, is still one major theme—fascination with the question of how can human beings get along with themselves, and with others, under environmental contexts which look solid, yet may be ephemeral. (Interview 2008)

Cultural psychology: underlying assumptions

Psychological science was a highly fragmented discipline in the 20th century, in its mainstream a quantitative discipline, leaning towards natural sciences. Jaan Valsiner's grand program is to develop a new comprehensive theory of human psychological life in its socio-cultural context, linking it to broader humanitarian tradition.

His position in the field of contemporary scientific psychology is "positively rebellious", he is consistently criticizing the mainstream reductionist and theory-free empiricist "psychology of variables" (see Toomela, Valsiner 2010). At the same time he is constructing his own theoretical alternative. Semiotic cultural psychology (or cultural psychology of semiotic dynamic) has roots in philosophy, developmental psychology, social anthropology, sociology, semiotics, thus transcending fixed disciplinary boundaries. Cultural psychology deals with higher mental functions, which reflexively form meaningful human experiences and are semiotically regulated.

Contemporary cultural psychology is a growing field of a number of parallel directions that all share the interest in explaining context-relatedness of human acting, feeling, and thinking. It builds its theoretical generalizations on the grounds of one or another notion of complementarity of the person and the surrounding social world.

For people coming from positivist psychological tradition it may be not easy to understand the texts of Jaan Valsiner. He is speaking

about complex phenomena, striving towards precision. The questions he keeps asking are embedded in a certain methodological frame. He has consistently applied a dialectical approach to the knowledge construction, which entails

- **dialogical and relational ontology**, according to which any entity consists of opposite dualities that are mutually constitutive and systemically linked—thus they are united, rather than mutually exclusive. According to this view, opposites like *a person and her environmental context, subject and object, internal and external, real and potential/imaginary, past and future, freedom and constraints, the concrete and the abstract, particular and universal, ground and figure, the unique and the general, explicit and implicit* etc. can be considered as complementarily united opposites, related by “inclusive separation”;
- **developmental focus** which is based on the assumption that tension between mutually linked opposites leads to qualitative transformations of the whole system (“leaps into novelty”);
- **transformational methodology**, which strives to retain qualitative uniqueness and full variability of the studied phenomena.

In his interview from 1989 he explains his dialectic approach:

“Dialectical approaches are almost always synonymous with vagueness. When somebody deals with something very complex, fluid and dynamic, then it is easy to label the approach “dialectical”.—Instead of accepting vagueness as a necessary state of theory you can define dialectics more narrowly, that is, by looking at opposites confined to the same system, which lead to the reorganization of that whole into a new quality. In a nutshell that is what it is all about. [...]

I try to see how the two sides are interlinked. Part of this follows from my emphasis on context-dependendess in looking

at phenomena. One part of the dichotomy may actually be the context for the other. Two seemingly opposing parts can actually be connected with one another so that one creates a context for the other, or vice versa.

[...] “Independent dependence” is an example of this dialectical opposition. It implies that, in the background, there is always, for every dependent act that an individual undertakes, a clear independence and for every independent act that the person undertakes, there is a dependent background. (Klaue 1989: 340)

Jaan Valsiner’s project of constructing a general psychological theory, is based on certain axiomatic assumptions and theoretical implications that grow out of them:

- **Irreversibility of time** and the processual/developmental character of all psychological phenomena—they are all directed towards pre-adaptation with an uncertain future, the human psyche is future-oriented. The focus of study should therefore be on the dynamic processes and mechanisms of development (the phenomena of emergence, becoming, and transformation) rather than on outcomes of psychological processes (classifications of pre-defined static entities). Irreversibility of time also entails **uniqueness of each human experience**.
- **Holism:** complex psychological phenomena are wholes. Empirical studies should preserve the integrity of the original phenomenon instead of reduction of wholes into elements (like variables in mainstream psychology).
- Psychological wholes are **structured** and **hierarchically organized** rather than diffuse and undifferentiated. Interdependence of hierarchical levels of organization is a prerequisite for the functioning of a system. For example, meanings are structured as complexes of united oppositions and are multi-leveled.

- **Systemic causation** and catalytic conditions, instead of elementaristic linear causality are operating in the psychological systems.
- A human being is an **open dynamic system**, constantly interacting with the context. Like the functioning of biological systems, human psychological functioning (meaning-making) is redundant, producing and amplifying **variability** as a resource for adapting to the uncertain future. Redundancy is the only way to guide the direction of open systems. Attention to full variability (both realized and unrealized possibilities), instead of mainstream psychology's usual reduction to the average, is the key to understanding psychological phenomena.
- **Contextuality** of human acting, thinking and feeling. Context provides affordance and constraints (guiding the directionality of human activities). Hence the criticism of using de-contextualized variables in mainstream psychology.
- Centrality of **semiotic mediation** in human socio-psychical functioning. Signs function as directing and constraining tools in relation to human activities. Culture is defined as the process of semiotic mediation which functions within persons (as personal meaning making) and between persons (mechanisms of social guidance and canalization).
- Focus on human **meaning-making processes** in relation to the socio-cultural environment: Human beings never cease to construct meanings (sign hierarchies) in order to organize and make sense of the current of experience and regulate their relations to the environment. Sign mediation enables psychologically to transcend the immediate here-and-now setting and to be flexible to encounter the uncertain future.

The person does not just interpret (by oneself, and by others) constructed signs, but constructs the specific structure of one's personal relation with the world by way of constructing

signs. [...] signs simultaneously link the person with the world and distance the person from the world (interview 2008).

Psychological processes that are guided by cultural meanings cannot be reduced to fixed “variables” and “measured” by standardized scales as is usual in mainstream psychology. Human phenomenological experience should be in the focus.

- Producing general knowledge is the essence of science. Instead of inductive empiricism or common sense “myth stories”, psychological theory should be based on **universal abstract models** that are applicable to full variability of concrete context-dependent phenomena. Abductive generalization is most suitable in psychology.
- **General principles** of psychological functioning are represented in **each unique case**, therefore it is necessary to systematically study single cases in their complex wholeness and concrete relations with the environment, instead of aggregating data from large samples of individuals. Psychology is necessarily qualitative, idiographic science.

My own theory has some value (sometimes it seems to me) because it is simultaneously general and phenomena-close (interview 2008).

In developing his original approach Jaan Valsiner synthesizes ideas from diverse fields and epochs, the three most influential thinkers in his scientific *Umwelt* are Juri Lotman, C. S. Peirce and Henri Bergson (see Retrospect 6 in this volume).

Writing and editing

Throughout his numerous books and articles (in April 2014 his complete bibliography comprised 424 published articles, book chapters and books—see <http://personprofil.aau.dk/profil/130747#/cv>, by May 2016 an additional 43 publications had appeared), Jaan Valsiner

has elaborated his theoretical ideas and applied them in different contexts. Jaan Valsiner himself highlights as the most relevant the following books:

- 1987, 1997 *Culture and the Development of Children's Action*. New York: Wiley.
- 1998 *The Guided Mind*. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press.
- 2000 *The Social Mind: Construction of the Idea*. New York: Cambridge University Press (with Rene van der Veer)
- 2007 *Culture in Minds and Societies*. New Delhi: Sage.
- 2012 *A Guided science: History of Psychology in the Mirror of Its Making*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.
- 2014 *An Invitation to Cultural Psychology*. Sage.

His last co-edited book so far—*Psychology as the Science of Human Being: The Yokohama Manifesto* (eds. J. Valsiner, G. Marsico, N. Chaudhary, T. Sato, V. Dazzani. Springer 2016).

Jaan Valsiner has established the journal, *Culture & Psychology* (London: Sage) in 1995 and has been its editor ever since. From 2007 he is also the editor-in-chief of *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Sciences* (Springer).

He is the editor-in-chief of three book series (*Advances in Cultural Psychology: Constructing Human Development*-with Information Age Publishers, USA; *History and Theory of Psychology*-Transaction Publishers, USA, and *Cultural Dynamics of Social Representation*-with Routledge in UK), and one of the founding editors of the *Yearbook of Idiographic Science* (since 2008).

Beyond the books in these series, he has edited leading handbooks in the fields of developmental and cultural psychology: *Handbook of Developmental Psychology* (with K. Connolly. London: Sage, 2003), *Cambridge Handbook of Socio-Cultural Psychology* (2007, with A. Rosa), *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), *The Cambridge Handbook of*

Social Representations (with G. Sammut, E. Andreouli, and G. Gaskell) (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Connection with Estonia

Jaan Valsiner's primary socialization occurred in a specific context, he spent his first thirty years (1951–1980) in Estonia—the advanced western periphery of the USSR at that time. Such institutions as Tallinn secondary school no 7, Tallinn Pedagogical Institute and Tartu State University may be proud of having nurtured him academically. His theoretical endeavours, research and mentoring activity started already during the early studentship years at Tartu University (see his own recollections in the 1st interview in this volume and Klaue, 1989). In the context of relative freedom he could begin to synthesize the dialectical methodology, at least nominally propagated in the marxism-based higher education at that time, and glimpses from the western empirical psychology that could permeate through the “iron curtain“. His scope of interests was wide: non-verbal communication, spatial behavior, ethology, psycholinguistics, early human ontogenesis, processes of mother-child interaction, phylogenesis of language, development of visual perception, not to mention the topics of his early publications. He initiated several research projects, carried out empirical studies and supervised his fellow-students in Tartu, but also built creative networks throughout the researchers in Moscow, Leningrad, Tbilisi and other universities in the USSR.

Beside psychology, he was interested in theoretical biology (participating in *Schola biotheoretica*), and semiotics (Juri Lotman was at the peak of his career at Tartu University at that time).

In 1980, Jaan Valsiner managed not to return to the Soviet Union. According to the practice at that time, his name disappeared from the public sphere and his publications were not allowed in the USSR any more. His colleagues and students lost contact with him. In the west Jaan Valsiner continued to pursue his scientific interests,

and also published some texts on the Soviet reality from an insider's perspective (J. Valsiner. The father's role in the social network of a Soviet child: The nationalization of the family. – M. Lamb (ed.), *The role of the father in child development*. 2nd ed. New York: Wiley 1981, 187–201; J. Valsiner. *The childhood of the Soviet citizen: Socialization for loyalty*. Ottawa: Carleton University Press 1984 (published lecture)). In the 90s he published several overviews on Soviet and Russian psychology (J. Valsiner. *Developmental psychology in the Soviet Union*. Brighton: Harvester Press 1988; J. Valsiner. Environmental psychology in the Soviet Union. – *Studies in Soviet Thought* 1989, 37, 61–71; J. Valsiner. Comparative-cultural research in Soviet psychology. – *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* 1993, 31, 1, 5–10; J. Valsiner. Social utopias and knowledge construction in psychology. – V. A. Koltsova, Y. N. Oleinik, A. R. Gilgen, C. K. Gilgen (eds.), *Post-Soviet perspectives on Russian psychology*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1996, 70–84).

It is difficult to differentiate separate periods in Jaan Valsiner's intellectual evolution, as relevant topics are entangled and elaborated in parallel in his works. He started with issues of child development, which was his main topic in the 1980s. Later he expanded his focus to the whole human life span development (T. Zittoun, J. Valsiner et al. *Melodies of living*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013). In parallel he analyzed the development of ideas in psychology (e.g. Van der Veer, Valsiner 1991; Valsiner, Van der Veer 2000; Valsiner 2012). Issues of semiotic regulation and meaning construction appeared in the 1990s (Valsiner 1998) and are on the forefront until now. Methodological issues have been topical throughout his academic life. In an early programmatic paper (Valsiner 1984) he criticized the mainstream correlational approach in psychology and demonstrated that sample-based generalizations cannot be applied to individual cases. Instead he proposed variational epistemology, which is elaborated in his following works. Wide interdisciplinary context has been specific to Jaan Valsiner's approach from the very beginning, references to biology and philosophy are most prevalent.

In recent years he has also incorporated music, visual art and literature into his psychological analyses (e.g. Valsiner 2014).

Only after Estonia regained its independence, Jaan Valsiner re-appeared in the Estonian academic sphere—with publications (J. Valsiner, J. Review: Peeter Tulviste’s continuing expedition, or Estonian psychology between the three worlds. – *Akadeemia* 1992, 4, 10, 2195–2199 (in Estonian); J. Valsiner. Social sciences and little countries: when “big” may mean “small” and vice versa. – *TRAMES: A Journal of the Humanities and Social Science* 1998, 2 (whole 52/47), 1, 120–129; J. Valsiner. Kultuuripsühholoogia [Cultural psychology]. – *Keel ja Kirjandus* 2008, 51, 8-9, 675–683 (in Estonian; reprinted in M Tamm (ed.), *Humanitaarteaduste metodoloogia*. Tallinn: TLÜ Kirjastus 2011, 226–237; J. Valsiner. Between fiction and reality: Transforming the semiotic object. – *Sign System Studies* 2009, 37.1, 99–113; J. Valsiner. Three species in a zoo: Notes from a cultural hinterland of biosemiotics. – T. Maran, K. Lindström, R. Magnus, M. Tonnesen (eds.), *Semiotics in the wild*. Tartu: University of Tartu Press 2012, 165–175), as well as with annual lecture courses and seminars in Tallinn University, inspiring new generations of students.

Overview of this volume

This book contains a collection of unpublished texts by Jaan Valsiner and two interviews with him. The papers are organized into six thematic chapters, according to the main focus of the texts. Throughout the papers we can trace the unfoldment of his central ideas. In line with his methodological principles, abstract theoretical models are related to phenomena through systematic analysis of single cases (e.g., description of intimate experiences in biographical narratives and literary texts; analysis of semiotically organized environments like church ruins, balconies, vending machines or decorated temples; analysis of the functioning of educational institutions in European colonies).

The structure of this volume is not rigid, the borders between chapters are “porous”, relevant topics may reappear in different contexts. Each chapter is concluded by a retrospective comment by Jaan Valsiner, written in 2013.

I. TRAJECTORIES OF PSYCHOLOGY IN SOCIETAL CONTEXT

In two keynote addresses and an acceptance speech for *Doctor honoris causa*, Jaan Valsiner outlines two developmental trajectories of psychological science:

On the one hand, the mainstream tradition which studies psychological phenomena as static entities and uses standardized measurement instruments. Valsiner criticizes this tradition as pseudo-empirical and producing data that are alienated from the phenomena studied, thus nonsensical. On the other hand, a new emerging direction of various cultural psychologies which seeks to understand complex human phenomena in their live dynamics and to explain the mechanism of the emergence of novelty. In “Climbing the sacred mountain of knowledge...” the main methodological principles of this new emerging stream of knowledge are presented. In Jaan Valsiner’s interpretation two “peripheries”—Columbia and Estonia—pursue different strategies in relation to the mainstream “center”: Estonian psychologists try to conform, while Latin-American psychologists show intellectual independence.

II. HOW TO STUDY QUALITATIVE DEVELOPMENTAL PHENOMENA?

Two papers in this section highlight some methodological principles for studying psychological phenomena—like any other dynamic processes—in their qualitative complexity and developmental dynamics.

Firstly, **dialogical perspective** is introduced, which enables us to retain the complexity of the studied phenomena in descriptions and explanations. Analogies from astronomy and biology help to understand this.

In the second paper, methodological tools for dealing with developmental phenomena—**abductive generalization** introduced by Peirce and **genetic logic** by Baldwin—are analyzed. The focus is on the development of the concept of abduction, illustrating principally unfinished character of any scientific endeavor.

III. FOCUS OF CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY:

CULTURE AS A PROCESS WITHIN AND BETWEEN PERSONS

In this section Jaan Valsiner explains the main focus of cultural psychology: to reveal general laws for human cultural existence.

In the first article he compares **two views of culture**. In the common sense view (also maintained in *cross-cultural psychology*) culture is something between people—through which people “belong together”, or to which people belong. Culture is conceptualized as a static and homogeneous phenomenon. In contrast, in *cultural psychology*, culture is understood as process of semiotic mediation that unfolds **within** each person. Culture is understood here as a process of semiotic regulation of interpersonal and intrapersonal psychological processes. Although the distinction between cross-cultural and cultural psychology is crucial: the first is part of differential psychology, the latter—of general psychology—they complement each other. In “Culture, development and methodology...”, the axioms of developmental science perspective are presented.

In the second paper, the concept of **functional culture** is analyzed—it reflects the dynamic and functional focus of cultural psychology: attention is paid to the **use** of culture—how semiotic tools function in the regulation of interpersonal and collective processes, and of psychological processes within each individual. Transformational model of forms of marriage is used as an example.

IV. SEMIOTIC PROCESSES: HOW MEANINGS ARE MADE?

This section underlines the necessary integration of semiotics and psychology. Semiotic tools—signs—are used by any psychological subject to regulate one's own (and others') psychological worlds. In the psychological and social systems meanings are organized hierarchically, where each higher level of meaning directs and constrains the lower ones. Jaan Valsiner's model of intra-psychic sign hierarchy (see Figure 4.6.) consists of pre-verbal (physiological), verbal and post-verbal levels of sign complexes. Values belong to the highest level of semiotic regulation—they are affective generalized field-like promoter signs.

V. CULTURAL-SEMIOTIC REGULATION IN SOCIETAL AND INTERPERSONAL PROCESSES

In this section, two kinds of institutional practices are analyzed from the cultural psychological viewpoint. Social interventions (schooling) proceed in the dialogical tension between the interveners and the intervened, the result depending on mutual strategies and counter-strategies. The opposition between orientation to knowledge-for-consumption or knowledge-to-production is central in the educational interventions of our time. The last paper in this section analyzes the wide-spread practice of assessment as a communicative process, claiming that from a developmental point of view, assessment should be directed to the future state of a system ("The shift from the *assessment-of-what-is* to the *assessment-of-what-could-be*").

VI. CULTURAL-SEMIOTIC SELF-REGULATION

The papers of this section deal with different aspects of intra-personal cultural-semiotic self-regulation. In the first paper, the human self is conceptualized as a semiotic process: self, identity and other

psychological concepts are not invisible ontological entities but semiotic constructions, with the help of which persons and societies regulate their activities. In the second paper of this section, Jaan Valsiner highlights the processes through which a person constructs a system of meanings, projects it to the external world and subjugates himself to it. Meanings give form and stability to ever-changing flow of experiences. The last article of the volume focuses on the regulation of activities through culturally organized environmental context, the structure of social practices and hierarchies of semiotic tools, based on the sociological activity theory of education, developed by Harry Daniels and Basil Bernstein .

VII. INTERVIEWS WITH JAAN VALSINER

Interview by Gunther Mey and Katja Mruck (1998) is reproduced here in a slightly abridged form. It gives a “route map” of Jaan Valsiner’s trajectory in science and his comments on his most essential ideas.

Video-interview (2008) is transcribed and published for the first time. Specificity of the cultural psychological approach related to mainstream psychology is discussed with Tatsuyo Sato and Aaro Toomela, close collaborators of Jaan Valsiner.

This collection of papers is heterogeneous and “over-abundant”—repetition of basic ideas in different contexts is an approach that Jaan Valsiner uses systematically (cf his argumentation on necessary over-production in biological systems and over-abundance of semiotic systems). In this book this redundancy is preserved: each seeming repetition is actually unique as it appears in different contexts.

The book is not linearly organized, therefore reading it from the beginning to the end is not the only option. Different trajectories for approaching this volume are possible. For example, those readers who are interested in the personal side, should start from reading the interviews and retrospective comments at the end of