Meanders of meaning: Exploring semiotic mechanisms to overcome Psychology's research problems

LIA DA ROCHA LORDELO
Federal University of Bahia, Brazil

This commentary addresses some of the ways through which we construct knowledge from a semiotic cultural psychological oriented point of view. My specific intention is to apply some of the mechanisms discussed in this issue – in particular, semiotic processing and meaning transfer – to a specific topic of my research interests, which is how children make sense of their everyday activities and routines, and how these meanings are constructed within their personal and collective cultural spheres. From that analysis, I conclude that, whichever concepts we choose to address the general notion of meaning-making in our daily lives – which is the theme of this issue - , the focus on mechanisms (the focus on HOW the process happens) is what can unify different perspectives inside cultural psychological theories.

Keywords: semiotic mechanisms; meaning transfer; semiotic processing; personal culture; collective culture.

INTRODUCTION

One of the biggest concerns in contemporary, semiotically oriented cultural psychology is, in my point of view, methodological – which surely underlies epistemological issues (Rosa & Valsiner, 2007). Cultural psychology's methodological approach has been more and more oriented towards an ideographical focus in which abstract generalization is accomplished through "single-case systemic analyses" (Valsiner, 2009, p. 19). In order to build this kind of theoretical generalization from single cases (which is the complete opposite from the empirical generalization traditionally pursued in psychological investigations), the researcher must, in a way, set aside content and concentrate more on processes – that is, instead of asking *what*, he or she should ask *how*. It is not to say that the content should be forgotten, but instead what I mean is that a semiotically oriented cultural psychology is particularly interested in following the *dynamics* of the phenomenon studied. Such is the case for researchers working on meanings occurring on microgenetic levels of development or dedicating themselves to longitudinal studies; these should be examples of researches methodologically designed to try and grasp some dynamicity in psychological phenomena.

In that sense, an issue dedicated to the semiotic mediation of everyday life fits well with these tendencies in cultural research. In that sense, some of the articles presented in this special issue seem to respond very accurately to the need of methodological innovation that captures somehow the ever-ongoing act of meaning-making that defines us humans as well as focuses on the question of "how" instead of "what". With that

concern in mind, I will attempt to apply some of the mechanisms discussed in this issue (**semiotic processing** and **meaning transfer**) to a specific topic of my research interests. I have been studying the meanings in-between childhood and work for children from different cultural contexts in Brazil – how children make sense of their everyday activities and routines, and how these meanings are constructed within personal and collective cultural spheres. I will try to explore how the meaning transfer and sign convergence mechanisms might be present in a boy´s process of making sense of his laboral activity.

USING SEMIOTICS IN EVERYDAY LIFE: THE CASE OF NELSON

In the rural zone of a city in the State of Bahia, Brazil, Lenira, 44 years old, own small pieces of land, where she raises pigs, burns,[1] and sells cashew nuts; she also owns a grocery store inside the piece of land where her house is located. Eleven-year-old Nelson is the "man of the family", the person in charge of the small establishment (we say man of the family, also because the father was barely mentioned during the visit). In our case study, he is considered – as he considers himself – a working child. When he is not at school, Nelson divides himself between playing in the grocery store´s surroundings and actually working in it – selling products when costumers arrive. He also goes along with his mother periodically into the city in order to buy the products wholesale, which will be later resold by them. He has two sisters: Neide, 22, who has quit school a long time ago due to a mental health condition (not specifically addressed by the mother), and performs some household tasks; and Natália, 7, who goes to school but does not perform any kind of job, because according to her mother, she´s still too young do that.

At first sight, Nelson´s work hours are extremely long: he opens the grocery store at 8am from Monday to Friday; at noon, he has lunch and goes to school; a little after 4:30pm he is back to work, and closes the store at 6pm, when the family lets the dog in the propriety, get inside the house, have dinner and watch television, and then goes to bed. On Saturday, the grocery is open all day long, and on Sunday, until noon approximately. We say "at first sight", because Nelson referred twice to the moment of being at the store as a period of play or leisure: he told me he used to hang around there, playing, and from time to time, a costumer came and he would respond to his or her needs – stating prices, selling things. When asked about his work routine, he describes it the following way:

> "Nelson – Then, I wake up at 7:30am, then I take a shower, brush my teeth, have breakfast, then I hang around playing, when someone comes, I´ll go sell."

His work tasks do not appear detached or contrasted with the other activities of his day; on the contrary, his day is described as "playing and selling". That mixture does not lessen his responsibilities: his work involves knowing by heart the prices of all the

[1] The handmade process of making cashew nuts, one must burn them in a large pan over the fire, crack them and save their core.

products available at the grocery store, calculating the changes in the purchases and accompanying his mother at the city to buy the goods that they sell. It also involves dealing with situations like the one that took place in the moment of the interview: we are interrupted by one of the customers who wants to pay for a beer (he seems to be drunk) and the man makes fun of Nelson´s size, and other slightly unpleasant jokes. The boy accepts the paying for the beer and faces somewhat impatiently the man´s jokes. He explains the situations where he needs to use the calculator; reports the periods of the month when the sales increase – the weekends, for instance, which is when people working in the land are paid. The way I had access to the boy and his family is actually linked to his obligations: they buy goods for their grocery store in a market that belongs to a cousin of mine. My cousin told me I simply had to interview Nelson; she described him as an extremely serious and responsible boy, and that he took care of the family business like a grownup. It is, somehow, contrasting with the way work is present in Nelson´s speech.

In our research, we have constructed meanings related to two particular signs: WORK and CHILDHOOD. The data was approached with a dialectical-hermeneutical method (Minayo, 1998), from semi structured interviews made with the children concerning work, school and childhood, as well as from a full description of the child´s daily activities by him or herself. For Nelson, we have two groups of meanings concerning CHILDHOOD, and two others concerning WORK. After listing them, I will explore what they encompass:

MEANINGS OF WORK AND CHILDHOOD:

1. Childhood-play
2. Childhood-forbiddances
3. Work inside play
4. Work-development

1. Childhood - play

In a way, Nelson can be considered the child with the longest work hours within the study (ten children were interviewed), but he is also one of the participants that more extensively relates the meaning of childhood to play. He directly refers to the act of playing, usually with his sister, when there are no costumers around, or with friends who come to his house; he talks about how good it is to be able to play more – especially on Friday, when school is finished, and that being a child is “very great”, because he has the chance of playing and being happy.

2. Childhood - forbiddances

In Nelson´s speech, there is evidence concerning a child that cannot do anything he wants – he must be careful with any kind of hectic playing, for he runs the risk of getting hurt somehow; he can also see television programs (usually soap operas, which are very popular in Brazil) that are on later at night when he gets to the age of twelve; he also claims that his younger sister does not work yet, for she´s still too young for it (she´s seven). I notice that, in spite of having great responsibilities (he sells products in the

grocery store, adds numbers and goes to the city with his mother to shop for goods), Nelson understands that there are prohibitions put on him and these prohibitions vary according to his age.

3. Work inside play

As it was mentioned in the first group of meanings, Nelson´s workload seems to be long. Every morning, every afternoon after school, every Saturday (sometimes he leaves work and his mother takes his place) and every Sunday morning – he is at the grocery store. Nevertheless, it is a load in which play seems to fit, or else, maybe it´s the other way around:

> Nelson – (...) then I take a shower, brush my teeth, have breakfast, then I hang around playing, when someone comes, I´ll go sell.

He explains that the grocery store is not very busy during the week, and because of that he can play a lot; on weekends, the situation is a little different.

> Nelson – Yes, then, on Saturday, Sunday that people are working, and on the weekend they earn their money and come to buy more...
> Lia – oh, I get it...
> Nelson – or else, when it´s the end of the month, people come to buy, they get their Money, retired people do...
> Lia – oh, who is; I thought that was at the beginning of the month; that people had more money at the beginning of the month, no?
> Nelson – Yes... here, people receive money on the 25th or before, and then, they start to come (-)…

The practical knowledge and experience Nelson has in the store does not prevent him from saying that he spends a lot of time playing – the mixture of play and work is mentioned by Invernizzi and Tomé (2007), exactly in the case of laboral activities performed by young people in a Portuguese rural area. The authors show the example of a teenager who increases the time dedicated to playing, because of the malleable nature of his work hours. That seems to be Nelson´s case.

4. Work-development

In general, Nelson has only positive remarks on his work. He claims that he works because he likes it, and talks about the advantages of his activity – to learn more, to do calculations etc; work appears as helping him develop. This evaluation is linked to his fondness of studying; as the interview was made during school vacation, Nelson claimed to be "crazy" for school to start, because he enjoyed all its activities. His mother Lenira has plans for his future (as well as he does):

> Lenira – Then I´ll put him in college, I´ll do everything, for he´s so smart... People are impressed with him.

From a post-Saussurean perspective on semiotics, Wall (2013) addresses the mechanism of sign convergence and meaning transfer. In his article, he focuses on objects that people associate to the memory of deceased friends or family members, and how the meaning of these objects is transformed – through a repeated exposure to the object and the deceased before death, or through a meaningful experience before or after death. For instance, a young man, Alexander, remembers his deceased grandmother through a pin she once won in a poetry contest – the pin reminds Alexander of the relationship we had with his grandmother, her life stories and her passion for poetry which he shared with her.

When we use objects to remember people, we activate a process of changing their meaning – transforming the relationship we have with them. Wall (2013) states that "the signifier of a sign is lost and the concept of the sign is expressed through another sign (2013, p. 24). As Saussure would stress, the link between the signified and the signifier is arbitrary. For example: the signifier "tree", the word, and the concept of tree have no necessary relationship, for the concept can be linked to different words in different languages that also mean tree – in Portuguese, the word would be *árvore*. This arbitrariness is true not only on that level, but also on a broader, more abstract level – that is, when we refer to less concrete or material objects than a tree. Let´s take the sign WORK. In the case of my research, we have a boy, Nelson, who´s making sense of his daily activities in a context where work is not considered a suitable activity for a child. More than that, childhood is usually understood as a special period of development, where children are supposed to study, learn and play – all activities that would be important for the child´s future. In that sense, in a child´s daily life, there´s no room for work – an activity suitable for adults.

Wall proposes a model of what he calls asymmetrical sign-convergence that explains an object´s transformation of meaning. The asymmetrical nature of the meaning transfer is due to the fact that, once the person is deceased, his or her actual presence cannot trigger any type of meaning transfer and only the opposite semiotic movement is possible – an object will remind us of a passed beloved one, but not the other way around. As a hypothesis, I would say that, on a psychological level, that lack of symmetry is not possible. Even when a person is not in our physical presence, or even if we are not performing an activity, if we can think of that activity or person, then we can trigger the meaning transfer process. The more abstracted and affective-based, the more continuous is the meaning-making process. In the case of my research: Nelson is an eleven-year-old boy that talks about "work inside play". That is probably because, in spite of having an extensive workload, as I mentioned before, his work hours appear to be "spread" throughout his speech or, one could also say, seen under a different light – a psychological device through which it´s possible to see a childhood in which there´s a "natural" place for work. In addition, Nelson also links the sign WORK to signs that could be traditionally linked to being a child, such as LEARNING and DEVELOPMENT. We could argue that some meanings are being transferred to different signifieds, as Wall claims. Of course, we are dealing here with much more abstract, or hypergeneralized (Valsiner, 2012, p. 261) signs than the sign TREE. Turning to the research I presented,

we cannot assume that being a child psychologically excludes the possibility of working – in spite of what we might think of that fact.

While Wall represents how in a pre-stage convergence the person is signified by his or her actual presence, it´s the object that triggers the link between signifier and signified after his/her death (see Figure 1 in Wall, 2013, p. 25). In the case of working boy Nelson, for whom there isn´t a rupture like death to produce the convergence, we can say that the very fact that he himself is a working boy is what brings on the convergence. Of course, having to work as a child in a context where work is not an appropriate activity for children is a sort of "rupture event", in a sense somewhat similar to what some researchers within a life-course developmental perspective (Zittoun, 2012) have called ruptures. We could not consider the fact that Nelson works as a critical "moment" or "turning point" (Zittoun, 2012, p. 517), especially because we are not studying his developmental trajectory as a whole (which would be the central object of a life-course sociocultural perspective). But it is disruptive in the sense that it is something that provokes change. These changes could be of different natures – related to changes in learning processes, identity definitions, and in sense-making (Zittoun, 2012); the three of which could easily be linked to Nelson´s meanings of work. The main point is that many events in life can trigger sign-convergence, or can simply change the links between signs again and again. And, although we are not analyzing these specific data from a life-course perspective, another argument inside that theoretical approach is useful to thinking about meaning transfer as not an asymmetrical operation. Authors (Zittoun, 2012; Valsiner, in press) have addressed the intransitive nature of developmental human processes, stating that living systems are "open in nature—depend for their existence upon their exchange relation with their environments" (Valsiner, in press, chp. 6, p. 2). The irreversibility of our life trajectories (Abbey, 2007; Zittoun, Valsiner, Vedeler, Salgado, Gonçalves, & Ferring, 2013) makes meaning-making processes, then, not exactly a symmetrical operation, but neither an asymmetrical one – because they can be changing in a myriad of directions, always depending on how we relate to our environment.

Therefore, stating that meaning transfer is not necessarily an asymmetrical operation is a hypothesis which is, in this commentary, directed to those types of signs we consider more generalized. That statement is related to the very mechanism of meaning-making, addressed by Kevin Carriere in his article about semiotic processing (Carriere, 2013a). The author claims that semiotic processing is precisely the mechanism we use to "gather semiotic data to constitute constructions of new signs" (p. 46), and seeks at the notion of intersubjectivity and the I-Sharing literature the theoretical background to validate his proposal. According to Carriere, processing entails acquisition, assessment and construction of semiotic information (see article), resulting in the emergence of new signs. It seems that, on a microgenetic level of analysis, these three subprocesses comprehend the mechanism through which a working boy comes from understanding general notions about being a child and what is or is not appropriate for him as such, to producing new signs closely linked to not only these general views, but also to his daily activities and their justification – especially on an affective level.

My point is that, if, in fact, we are compulsive meaning-makers (Valsiner, in press), we are certainly capable of reversing meaning transfer operations. But actually the term "reversing" might not be appropriate, given the irreversibility of our life trajectories (Zittoun, Valsiner, Vedeler, Salgado, Gonçalves & Ferring, 2013) and the continuous meaning-making process. From a microgenetic perspective to a broad social historical one, we are always transforming the world around us and therefore transforming ourselves. Valsiner states that, "as we *react to* and *act upon* the world in the middle of which we live, we construct it as *meaningful for ourselves"* (Valsiner, in press). It means that our existences are unique, especially in what concerns how we make sense of our singular lives.

That kind of "idiosyncrasy" in meaning construction is guaranteed by the relationship between personal culture and collective culture. Personal culture would be the active construction of a personal version of any cultural phenomenon (Lawrence & Valsiner, 2003, p. 730). In a similar way, Ernest Boesch (2008) reflects on what he calls subjective culture, stating that this would be constituted by individual meaning networks; he believes that in spite of the fact that these networks can overlap, they are rarely identical – which produces diversity and singularity of meanings. When it comes to the case study I brought, one could say that the meanings actively constructed by Nelson regarding work and childhood (work inside play, work-development, childhood-play and childhood-forbiddances) constitute the boy´s personal culture. It is relevant to add that the concept of personal culture cannot be analytically separated from its complement, which is the notion of collective culture – despite not being the object of our analysis. Collective culture is a concept that demands, from my point of view, a more complex empirical translation, because of its properties: while it is considered by Valsiner a relatively stable entity of collective origin (Valsiner, 2007, p. 63), it is also unstable and heterogeneous; such heterogeneity originates from its "episodic nature" (Valsiner, 2007, p. 63) in which this social construction takes place; one can say, thus, that collective culture is an interpersonal bricolage of externalizations made by a varied group of people " (Valsiner, 2007, p. 63). It is important to have in mind, especially for the analysis, the "ontological indeterminacy" (Valsiner, 2007) that characterizes collective culture: since it is constantly in the process of being collectively reconstructed, it cannot be described in the form and shape it exists in the present moment. Any representation of it will be some sort of delimitation of this unending reconstruction process. When we refer to meanings of the collective culture, we will be certainly dealing with a perceived homogeneity (Mahmoud, 2008, p. 228); or with a kind of momentary symbolic consensus that is particularly useful to data analysis. Also, Valsiner (2007) claims there is no isomorphism between personal and collective cultures, and that is what makes all persons unique, and yet supported, all of us, by collective culture´s broad background. This lack of correspondence between personal and collective symbolic spheres is assured precisely by the internalization of psychological functions´ process, which involves the mastering of socially available symbolic material and its personal transformation – which is this special issue´s main concern.

CONCLUDING POINTS

Whichever concepts we choose to address within the general notion of meaning-making in our daily lives – which is the theme of this issue - , the focus on mechanisms (the focus on HOW the process happens) is what unifies different perspectives inside cultural psychological theories. While Wall´s (2013) post-Saussurean contribution focuses on meaning change, Carriere´s (2013a) seems to be a semiotic, intersubjective approach to one of the central issues in cognitive psychology – the issue of processing. The same could be said of Carriere´s second study on affectivation (Carriere, 2013b) and Minikes´s (2013) article on semiotic switch. But turning to semiotics is more than a shift in the object of study; it is a methodological and epistemological turn – as the concern of cultural psychologists stands somewhat far away from cognitive psychologists´, for instance. We then claim to be not as interested in cognitive processes as we are in meaning-making ones. In Nelson´s case, we are capable of following the stages through which he comes from signifying work as a distant and inappropriate activity to a concrete one, related to his needs, his likes and dislikes, his perceived reality. The same path could be traced when we look at the data in this issue´s articles. For as Bruner (1998, p. 49) states, more important than establishing the ontological status of our psychological processes´ products is to understand how human beings construct their worlds. Through that statement, he outlines an epistemological landmark – and proposes for us, cultural psychologists, new challenges for producing science.

REFERENCES:

Abbey, E. (2007). Perpetual Uncertainty of Cultural Life. In: J. Valsiner & A. Rosa (Eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bruner, J. (1998). *Realidade mental, mundos possíveis*. Porto Alegre: Artes Médicas.

Boesch, E. (2008). Book review reply: On subjective culture: response to Carlos Cornejo. *Culture & Psychology*, 14 (4), 498-512.

Carriere, K. R. (2013a). Hunting and gathering for signs: A theoretical development of semiotic processing. *Psychology & Society*, 5(3), 44-65.

Carriere, K. R. (2013b). Making a place into a home: The affective construction of the feeling<>being differentiation. *Psychology & Society,* 5(3), p. 87-103.

Invernizzi, A. & Tomé, S. (2007). O trabalho de adolescentes no Algarve: um estudo sobre suas motivações, organização familiar e práticas de socialização. *Análise Social*, vol. XVII (184), 875-898.

Lawrence, J. & Valsiner, J. (2003). Making personal sense: an account of basic internalization and externalization processes. *Theory and Psychology*, 13 (6), 723-752.

Mahmoud, H. W. (2008). Negotiating the place of culture and emotion in the dialogical self (Commentary on Choi & Han). *International Journal for Dialogical Science,* 3 (1), 225-240.

Minayo, M. C. de S. (1998). *O desafio do conhecimento: pesquisa qualitativa em saúde.* São Paulo – Rio de Janeiro: HUCITEC/ABRASCO.

Minikes, G. (2013). Relation in action: The self and the other. *Psychology & Society*, 5(3), p. 66-86.

Rosa, A. & Valsiner, J. (2007). Socio-cultural psychology on the move: semiotic methodology in the making. In: J. Valsiner & A. Rosa (Eds.) *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Valsiner, J. (2007). Personal culture and conduct of value. *Journal of Social, Evolutionary, and Cultural Psychology*, 1 (2), 59-65.

Valsiner, J. (2009). Cultural Psychology Today: Innovations and Oversights. *Culture & Psychology*, 15 (1), 5-39.

Valsiner, J. (2012). *Fundamentos de Psicologia Cultural: mundos da mente, mundos da vida. Porto Alegre:* ArtMed.

Valsiner, J. (in press). *Invitation to Cultural Psychology*. London: Sage.

Wall, S. (2013). Objects of Commemoration: Sign convergence and Meaning Transfer. Psychology & Society, 5(3), 19-43.

Zittoun, T. (2012). Life-Course: A Socio-Cultural Perspective. J. Valsiner (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*. OUP, USA.

Zittoun, T., Valsiner, J., Vedeler, D., Salgado, J., Gonçalves. M., & Ferring, D. (2013). *Human Development in the lifecourse. Melodies of Living*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

AUTHOR BIOSKETCH:

Lia graduated in Psychology in Federal University of Bahia (2004), has a Masters Degree in Teaching, Philosophy and History of Sciences from federal University of Bahia/State University from Feira de Santana (2007), in which she dedicated herself to epistemological aspects of Vygotsky´s thought. In the research from her Doctor Degree in Social Psychology (2011), she studied meanings of work for children from different cultural contexts, using social psychological and cultural developmental perspectives. She has teaching experience in Epistemology and Developmental Psychology, focusing on Cultural-Historical Theory. She is now working at Federal University of Bahia through PNPD (Post-Doctor National Program). Her current research interests are guided by the set of theoretical, methodological and empirical assumptions of semiotically oriented cultural psychology. Email: lialordelo@gmail.com Mailing address: Institute of Psychology, Federal University of Bahia / Universidade Federal da Bahia, Rua Aristides Novis, 2, Estrada de São Lázaro , Salvador Bahia, Brazil.