The Personal, the Collective, and the Cultural: Introduction to the Special Issue

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A central task for psychology is to conceptualize the relation between people, social worlds, and culture. This special issue contains articles that do just this. From a primarily socio-cultural orientation, these articles address questions that range from how collectively available cultural forms are made meaningful by the individual to critical examinations of the concept of the individual from psychology. As a result of the diverse and often conflicting ways that these articles explore the issue of how individual and collective processes constitute human life, they represent, when taken together, a rich example of the complex processes through which consensually created cultural forms are negotiated, come into conflict, and coexist despite their differences.

The papers in this special edition all address the issue of the relation between the individual and their surrounding cultural environment. This issue is a crucial one for psychology. Individual people clearly develop in response to, and in anticipation of the environment. This certainly happens in complex and often reciprocal ways. Furthermore, there are multiple discourses through which these processes are understood, meaning that the relation between the individual and the surrounding cultural environment is understood in terms of multiple conceptual systems, which may prioritize different components or processes. Psychology is therefore faced with the double task of making sense out of its conceptual system, and out of the phenomena of human activity and interactivity.

The diversity of conceptual systems in psychology is evident in the articles included in this special issue, which use a variety of conceptual and theoretical resources to make sense out of the relation between the individual and the culture. They raise a number of important questions, including: "How can people create, maintain, and transform knowledge which pertains both to individual cognition and to socio-cultural knowing?" (Markova, 2000, p. 110; see also, Lordelo, 2014); How do we make sense of the competing notions of the person as a biological system, but also as a discursively produced set of concepts? (Byers, 2014); How does the dynamic interplay between self and other provide resources for identity development? (Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2014); How can collective cultural meanings come to regulate individuals' conduct? (de Mattos & Branco, 2014); How does the relationship between the individual and the social world become construed in different ways within different theoretical frameworks? (Byers, 2014; Glick, 2014).

The papers included in this special issue share a common orientation around different versions of what might be called socio-cultural or cultural psychology. All of the articles

emphasize the shared cultural world as a meaningful dimension that is central to the study of human activity, and the social processes through which this sharing occurs. Beyond this, there are important differences. The purpose of this introduction is to introduce some of the important concepts found throughout the included articles, and to summarize common themes.

Organization of the Introduction:

This introduction begins with an overview of the concepts of personal and collective culture, which are centrally used in two of the articles (de Mattos & Branco, 2014; Lordelo, 2014). These concepts provide one way to conceptualize the individual in relation to the social and cultural domains. The overview of personal and collective culture is followed by an overview of an alternative approach to conceptualizing the individual in relation to social and cultural world. This approach is described most prominently in this issue by Daiute (2014) and Glick (2014), but is also evident in Roychoudhury and Gardner's (2014) paper. Finally, there is a brief overview of Byers's (2014) article, which describes additional ways that the person may be conceptualized in psychology.

PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE CULTURE

One way to make sense of the relationship between the individual and the society can be found in the concepts of personal and collective culture. Several of the papers in this special issue make use of these concepts, albeit in different ways. To contextualize these papers, the following is an overview of the concepts of personal and collective culture, as described in the work of Jaan Valsiner, who originally described the terms and has used them most prominently in his work since the 1980's (Valsiner, 1989, 1998, 2000, 2007, 2014).

Personal Culture:

Valsiner describes personal culture as referring to "not only the internalized subjective phenomena (intra-mental processes), but to the immediate (person-centered) externalizations of these processes. (Valsiner, 2000, p. 55). In other words, personal culture refers to the private or public construction of meanings by an individual person.

The use of the concept of personal culture often occurs in the context of showing how an individual has constructed or is constructing a unique personal meaning, relative to the collective culture (e.g., Lordelo, 2014). While personal culture is the domain in which novel individual meanings are constructed, such constructive processes do not occur without influence from the collective culture. As Valsiner writes: "construction of personal culture takes place under the canalizing directions of the collective culture (Valsiner, 1989, pp. 47-48).

Collective Culture:

Valsiner's work shows several, partially overlapping ways of using the term collective culture. First, collective culture may be understood as the domain of cultural processes that

occur between people, rather than simply privately. This idea was highlighted by Valsiner (2014), who equated personal and collective culture to intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. There are various possible implications of this idea. If collective culture refers to any interpersonal process, then any public expression of a personal culture must also be an instance of collective culture.

In several places (e.g., Valsiner, 2000, 2014), Valsiner emphasizes that collective culture refers to interpersonal phenomena that are centered around a particular individual, or "person anchored" (Valsiner, 2014, p. 222). In other words, the collective culture is comprised of the cultural-semiotic aspects of the environment surrounding a particular person, that are available for the person to make sense of. This is evident in the following quote:

> "*The collective culture is composed of externalizations of personal meaning systems of always limited groups of persons. The resulting collective culture is a relatively stable entity of collective origin. So, my collective culture may consist of all of my experiences of other persons – friends, acquaintences, passers-by, beggars at church steps, policemen in the street, TV personages, old paintings created by artists years ago, and so on.*" (Valsiner, 2000, p. 56)

This second meaning portrays the collective culture in a way that is essentially a social-semiotic version of the perceptual field. Just as the organism is faced with the task of making sense of the perceptual field, the person is specifically confronted with the task of making sense out of the mass of sign vehicles present to the senses, which constitute one dimension of the perceptual field. The similarity to the perceptual field is also evident insofar as both it and the collective culture (as defined in the quote above) are centered on and relative to the organism. Both are limited; they are not constituted by everything that is external to the organism, but only those features of the environment that impinge on the organism.

The final meaning of collective culture that Valsiner describes is its consensual quality. In addition to being the immediately available externalizations of other personal cultures, he implies that collective culture has some level of stability, and is consensual. Accordingly, collective culture is not comprised of any and all externalized meanings available to a person, but rather those meanings that are perceived to form a consensus.

The idea that collective cultural phenomena are consensual is evident in Valsiner's (2000) use of examples of social norm construction to exemplify collective culture. These social norms are constructed and destroyed, but during their existence, they are stable (possibly only briefly and precariously stable) interpersonal phenomena. The precarious, yet momentarily stable nature of collective culture is particularly evident with social norms that are contrary to personal sense, such as the construction of auto-kinetic effect (Valsiner, 2000, p. 56).

Other explanations of collective culture also mention its consensual nature[1]. For example, Zittoun, et al. (2013, pp. 128-129) contrast the personal and collective cultural meanings of the film *Casino Royale*. In collective culture, the film may signify the last Bond film, and be about a risky poke game. Conversely, for a particular person (a personal culture), it may signify certain personal connections, e.g., with a gambling addicted family member. Here again, we see the idea that the collective culture is more than the totality of publically expressed meanings—it is also the perceived consensus that many of the meanings contribute to and simultaneously embody.

The fact that collective culture may involve interpersonal-consensus, rather than simply being the limited field of publically available meanings around a person is further supported by Valsiner's claim that collective culture is "a more autonomous entity than [personal culture]." (Valsiner, 2001, p. 55). This autonomy must be understood to involve potential for continuing persistence of specific [collective cultural] meanings independent of any particular person who performs them. It is not a claim about the fundamental autonomy of collective culture from any personal cultural process. The autonomous existence of a collective cultural meaning apart from any particular person implies the consensuality of collective culture, since, although the meaning is only expressed by individuals, it is not reliant on any particular individual for its persistence, which implies it must be part of a larger pattern.

Glick (2014) does not explicitly mention the notion of collective culture. However, at the conclusion of his article, he arrives at something very similar to this concept in his description of the habitus. As he describes it (drawing on Bourdieu's work), habitus is reminiscent of the notion of collective culture in that it prioritizes interactional space between people (rather than the cognitive processes of individuals). Just as Valsiner emphasizes the consensual nature of collective culture, Glick emphasizes the processes through which individuals occupying the same interactional space strive to "get with it", and avoid being "out of the loop" (Glick, 2014, p. 51).

Personal and collective cultures and the construction of novelty:

One way that the concepts of personal and collective culture have been used in Valsiner's work is as a way to account for the production of personal novelty, i.e., personally produced novel meanings (Valsiner & Lawrence, 2003). In the current issue, the production of novelty as this pertains to personal and collective culture is central in Lordelo's (2014) and de Mattos and Branco's (2014) articles. Both articles deal with this issue in different ways, however.

Lordelo shows how the meaning of work for working children in rural Bahia is different from the meaning found in mainstream "official" utterances from academics, government authorities, and other published sources. She attributes these differences to the way that

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[1] It is worth mentioning that, in this very process of attempting to identify the general ways that collective culture is understood, we are attempting to establish a consensus on collective culture, which is in itself a collective cultural phenomenon.

individuals internalize meanings from the collective culture and modify them to fit their individual lives. As a consequence of this modification, novel meanings are constructed.

De Mattos and Branco (2014) describe the production of novelty somewhat differently. Their analysis of a young woman's trajectory through multiple contexts reveals how the interface between personal and collective culture is the site for the production of novel personal meanings related to the notion of responsibility. Unlike in Lordelo's account, the crucial role of the collective culture in this process is not merely in supplying a meaning that becomes transformed into a novel form as a result of personal apropriation. Instead, the collective culture plays a canalizing role, furnishing Jane with experiences that are internalized and subsequently promote the production of new meanings—for Jane, these are various forms of responsibility—that allow for new forms of self-regulation.

De Mattos and Branco's account reveals a complex way that novel signs or meanings are constructed at the intersection of the individual and the social. The familiar Vygotskian story of processes occurring first socially and later individually (Vygotsky, 1978) is here, as evident in the following quote:

> "*As time passed, however, Jane looked for adult support in an older employee, Elena, who then acted as her mentor. Every time she had a problem or a doubt, Jane turned to Elena, who encouraged her and gave her support and advice to overcome these challenges. Jane said that Elena trusted her more than she trusted herself. Through her relationship with Elena, Jane was able to build self-confidence and to position herself as a responsible worker.*" (de Mattos & Branco, 2014, p. 19)

The quote shows how socially provisioned support is internalized by Jane in a way consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) claim about the social origin of mental functions. However, as stated previously, it is not the internalized personal meaning of support that is the novel construction. De Mattos and Branco's account suggests that this internalized meaning functions instead as a sort of catalyst (contextual conditions that enable the production of novel meanings (Cabell & Valsiner, 2014), akin to what Spencer et. al. (2009) call *non-obvious* development) for the development of a new personal meaning—responsibility—which functions as a novel sign that affords self-regulation.

Despite the differences between Lordelo's (2014) and de Mattos and Branco's (2014) research, they both emphasize the role of the individual in the production of novelty. The novel meanings of work constructed by rural children in Bahia and the notions of responsibility constructed by Jane were both personal constructions. These novel personal meanings were influenced by others, but they directly resulted from an active construction process of the individual—something that might be called a personal-cultural process.

AN INTERACTIONAL, DIALOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

As opposed to Lordelo (2014) and de Mattos and Branco (2014), who emphasize the role of individual agency in the construction of novelty and the regulation of activity, both Glick (2014) and Daiute (2014) argue against the idea of attributing actions, expressions of

meaning, or other psychological characteristics to the person as a discrete entity. Both authors are critical of attempting to define an individual based on meanings that they express (or that may be attributed to them) in any particular context, as if these meanings were the property of the individual independent of any particular context. They argue that unique facets of individuals (or groups) emerge in specific interactional contexts. While they primarily stress how different interpersonal contexts catalyze the emergence of different forms of activity, expression, or meaning-making, they also emphasize the necessity of including the material environment as a scaffold for potentially novel interpersonal phenomena. For example, Glick (2014) describes how a chair at the head of a table affords a sense of superiority (and by contrast, inferiority) amongst interlocutors sitting around the table.

The role of the environment in shaping human expression of meanings is further exemplified by Roychoudhury and Gardner's (2014) finding about the predominance of meanings involving the dynamic interdependence of self and other in the utterances of students taking part in a rap curriculum. The call and response quality of rap, as well as other Black aesthetic traditions in literature and music, has a structure that promotes a sense of the interdependence of the self and other. For Roychoudhury and Gardner, this provides an explanation for the high relative frequently of the value of *dynamic interdependence between self and other* in the rap narratives they analyzed.

Glick's and Daiute's claim (that meanings expressed by individuals should be treated as emergent phenomena attributable only to specific interactional contexts, rather than to the individual alone) might be seen as being in opposition to the distinction between personal and collective culture that is employed elsewhere in this issue, and beyond. This is not necessarily the case. Their arguments don't appear to dispute the utility of *any* conceptualization of an individual person, but rather approaches that attribute qualities or characteristics to the person that are, in fact, products of the interaction between that person and the environment. This critique raises essentially the same argument as the mereological fallacy described by Bennet and Hacker (2003). However, whereas Bennet and Hacker focus on neuroscientist's tendency to attribute qualities of the person to sub-components of the human organism, Glick and Daiute's arguments are against the slightly different but equally problematic practice of attributing qualities of particular contextualized interactions to the individual interactants. Their argument has clear implications for any kind of assessment or measure of a psychological process that attempts to claim that the measured variable is a property of the individual, abstracted from interactions and particular material contexts.

In her commentary, Daiute (2014) cites Roychoudhury and Gardner's (2014) article as an example of how researchers may focus on the dialogical emergence of different forms of human activity without reducing these phenomena to individuals. Roychoudhury and Gardner describe a large research project in which participants' utterances in various media are collected and coded to reveal the distribution of different values (a concept similar to meanings; see Daiute, Stern and Letitiu-Weinberger (2003) for details) across participants, time periods, and interactional contexts. Roychoudhury's and Gardner's results show that values appear to migrate across different expressive contexts, likely

between and within participants. Their work provides an example of how researchers may study collective cultural processes using methodological practices of quantitative and qualitative psychology.

Glick (2014) develops the point about interactional phenomena one further step. While he acknowledges that certain meanings may be a product of interactional dynamics, or of the addressivity that characterizes a particular interaction, he also emphasizes how, in a seemingly dialogical interaction between two or more people, one party may surreptitiously focus on certain meanings or aspects of the interaction, while ignoring others. To make this point, he draws on work by Anne-Marie Perret-Clermont (Sinclaire-Harding, Miserez, Arcidiacomo & Perret-Clermont, 2011; Perret-Clermont, 2012), which critiques certain uses of the clinical interview as a diagnostic tool. Glick explains that the clinical interview may be used in an interpersonal context characterized by assymetrical assumptions about the value of certain types of thinking on the behalf of the researcher and the participant:

> "*The structure of the interview is designed to see whether the child's answers ascend to the level of logical, scientific-like thought processes. Sinclaire-Harding, et. al., (2011) question this technique on several grounds that would have never occurred to have been raised in the initial "operational" experiments. The first point of questioning is profound – what makes the logical, scientific, the ultimate value? If the clinical interview is a dialogue between a child and a researcher with an end in mind (the logical/scientific) doesn't that focus help to obscure other features of the child's thinking, and in fact point the conversation and the report of the flow of the conversation totally in terms of the logical/scientific. What is lost are other features of the child's thinking, or of the interaction that are equally, if not more important things to represent.*" (Glick, 2014, p. 46)

Daiute (2014) makes an argument in her commentary that connects with the previous point. She argues that the researcher must thoroughly familiarize themselves in the situations they study, in order to orient to the local emic perspective from which research may be appropriately carried out. She writes:

> "*the researcher must be involved in the meaning making where it occurs, not separately, and thus with detailed engagements and analyses from a broad range of practices sampled in principled ways. The engaged researcher should not only to be involved in the activities in question as much as possible but also to make his/her own questions and methods as transparent and available to scrutiny as those of the subjects of inquiry.*" (Daiute, 2014, p. 76)

MULTIPLE WAYS TO CONCEPTUALIZE THE INDIVIDUAL PERSON

The idea of multiple orientations, frames, or conceptualizations intersecting around the same interaction is related to Byers's (2014) article, which describes two distinct approaches to conceptualizing the person that are used in psychological research. One is a causal-mechanical approach, which attempts to discern the structures and processes that

make up the organism. The other is a social-constructionist approach that focuses on how the individual person and other psychological phenomena are, in an important sense, signs, elaborated through discourse.

Byers emphasizes the differences between these two investigations, and argues that they cannot be reduced into each other. However, he also claims that with some conceptual re-organization, both conceptual systems might be able to relate coherently to each other within a more general, common paradigm. With such a system, the central question of this special issue (how to conceptualize the relations between the individual person, their participation in collective social interactions, and the culture) becomes reframed as the task of how to relate the concepts of psychology to the domains of the individual organism, and of the consensually constructed world of interpersonal discourse.

CONCLUSION

Despite the possibility of grouping the articles comprising this issue under the common label of socio-cultural psychology—and the article's shared concern with how to relate the variously defined domains of the personal, the collective and the cultural—they do not form a unified body of inquiry. There is more conceptual heterogeneity between these articles than would be expected from a unified research program within psychology. It is possible that the historical fragmentation of psychology into incommensurable research programs may again be occurring within socio-cultural psychology. Alternately, the diversity of the articles in this issue may be a reflection of the fractured base of the contemporary institution of psychology.

Just as the divergent traditions of psychology each have their own rationale that can explain and legitimize their own approaches, the articles that make up this issue can be used to explain the divergence of perspectives and approaches to socio-cultural psychology. For example, Glick emphasizes the multiple perspectives that may intersect and coexist in any interaction without any acknowledgement of this diversity. Byers (2014) treats the diversity of conceptualizations found in psychology as a resource for the development of a more complex conceptual base, although he claims that this can only happen if a way of integrating these conceptual systems is found. The concepts of personal and collective culture are also applicable to the task of understanding the diversity of concepts in socio-cultural psychology. They provide a way to explain how shared cultural forms are transformed into novel personal meanings that may persist in the midst of collective cultural processes. In fact, Lordelo's research, which is focused around Markova's question of "How can people create, maintain, and transform knowledge which pertains both to individual cognition and to socio-cultural knowing?" (Markova, 2000, p. 110), might have found a useful body of subject matter amongst the articles making up this special issue. Likewise, the value-analytic approach described by Roychoudhury and Gardner (2014) would be well suited to mapping the spread, contestation, and development through space and time of different meanings across this and other areas of psychology. Finally, de Mattos and Branco's (2014) account of the construction of the meaning of responsibility for a woman named Jane can be offers important insights for the familiar historical process through which mainstream psychology embraces novel approaches,

theories, and methodologies to make sense of its task. These applications suggest that, despite the differences between the articles, they each provide a different way to make sense of broadly similar phenomena relating to the convergence and divergence of perspectives, meanings and ideas that characterizes the individual, the social world, and the relation between them.

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