

# An Invitation to Cultural Psychology

Jaan Valsiner



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
Singapore | Washington DC

# 1

## Human Experience through the Lens of Culture: An invitation to psychology in a new key

My workspace is in disorder. Or so it seems—for others, not for me. Books, books, and more books—everywhere. Papers—copied articles, abandoned drafts—all over the floor. Nobody but myself can detect an order in this mess. Sometimes I fail as well. The search for an article I put into a special place among that artistic chaos—to find it later for sure—turns into a drama when that search fails. Of course the paper will be found sometime later. But the tension about ‘where on Earth did I put it?’ has by that time been lived through.

Not all books are the same for me. The volumes of Charles Darwin—in Russian first translation—are almost the only remnants from my father’s library. I do not read them—but remember my childhood surrounded by well-organized bookshelves. My father was adamant about where each book of his library was. He very reluctantly lent them out, in fear that the avid readers would lose or damage them. Yet among the books on my shelf now is that one that was damaged—by my father himself, as he grabbed it in rage and threw it on the floor. I had been reading *The Kon-Tiki Expedition* rather than doing my homework. So the book was snatched from me and thrown—in its flight it was hurt by a table corner. The scar is still there. This was the only time my father got angry with me. I still remember that, after half-century.

I learned about censorship in my reading through the books that surrounded me. After devouring half of *Decameron* that I found on the open shelf, it suddenly disappeared. Nobody would explain to a 12-year old boy where it had gone. Yet I found it in a locked cabinet. And read it through. Today I cherish a reproduction of Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* above my bookshelf. I enjoy it in all what it stands for. Nothing is more profound than

the beauty of the human body. But all too often it becomes covered up. The human drama starts from the simple and basic things that become very complex in our social worlds filled with drones, drugs, dictatorships, and democracies.

(from the author's diary)

Human experience is deep, personal, and potentially infinite. From the first cry of the newborn to the last sigh of the old person passing away, it is the person—the unique individual—who creates one's personal world through meaningful objects in one's immediate environment. Our subjective worlds are soothed by the places we have created for ourselves. We are agitated when we feel “foreign” in familiar settings and we feel intrigued when in foreign settings. We make the unfamiliar familiar by our constant creation of personal sense—based on cultural meaning systems—out of any object or encounter with the world. And, when it is familiar, we create ways in which it becomes unfamiliar again, so that the intrigue of living is maintained. We fight against boredom and overcome foreignness of the next moment of living.

The unity of strolling through meaningful environments—while the flow of consciousness rages within the mind—leads to human ways of being that have been captured by poets more prominently than by psychologists. Likewise, painters, singers, and gourmet cooks capture the sensualities of the human *psyche* more profoundly than scientists. A fashion designer or a fortune teller may satisfy the needs of human beings more fully than a visit to a professional psychologist can. The hairdresser and the grave-digger bring us to face the realities of being and being-no-longer. A Gregorian chant is irresistible in its beauty.

How can that be? There are a number of reasons for science lagging behind the arts. Psychology as a new and *liminal* science<sup>1</sup> has so far failed to capture the subjectivity of human unique experience. In fact, that experience has been eliminated from the beginning in the research efforts in most branches of psychology in favour of translating the complexities of feeling and thinking individuals into “data” that are supposed to reflect the psychological characteristics “objectively”. But the whole nature of human experience is subjective—based on lived-through past and anticipated future—so where is “objectivity” in it? We need to come to terms with the uneasy recognition that it is the *personally unique subjectivity* that is objective in psychology.

At first glance, this verdict looks like a contradiction in terms—or a denial of science. My goal in this book is to demonstrate that it

<sup>1</sup>The *liminal nature* of psychology as science—as it has been developing over the past two centuries—is analyzed elsewhere (Valsiner, 2012a). Located at the intersection of natural and human sciences, psychology has been a hostage to powerful social ideologies that have swayed the discipline off from the study of higher—volitional—psychological processes.

is neither. Rather, the objective nature of human subjectivity opens the door for charting out a new kind of science—that created through general knowledge of the extremely particular subjective experiences. With the emergence of cultural psychology since the 1980s there may be a new chance to capture the complex and dynamic phenomena of human experiencing. But for that to happen, many of the existing ways in which psychology creates its knowledge needs a constructive overhaul. The reader of this book is navigated through different ordinary, everyday, human phenomena where such innovation is necessary. I will try to show how one can re-think the ways in which science can capture the general features of the deeply affective subjective processes of intra-psychological and inter-psychological kinds. So, I invite all to join in this difficult but necessary task as, at least, spectators, but ideally as participants. Psychology as a science needs a general re-calibration.

## WHY IS PSYCHOLOGY IN TROUBLE?

The main obstacle to the development of scientific psychology of human experiencing is existential—all psychological phenomena are unique and personal as they occur. The *same* thought or feeling—in a similar context—cannot occur again. A *similar* one can, but that means that despite such similarity all the phenomena are unique.<sup>2</sup> This is an inevitable condition for all organisms that flourish within irreversible time—we can only look forward to tomorrow, but we cannot re-live yesterday. As Hans Driesch has succinctly put it:

I never *can* have the very same content a second or third time, because, by its having been had already, it is made different from what it was the first time! For the second or any subsequent time, that content carries in itself two accents: one of *before* and another of *already known*, which it did not carry when it was possessed first. Thus every content is exclusively what it is and there *cannot* be two quite identical contents. (Driesch, 1925, p. 25)

Of course the sentiment of uniqueness has been known in the Occidental mindset since the times of *Herakleitos* of Ephesus (535–475 BC), who pointed out to the nice citizens of the Ancient Greek *polis*-es that however much they may want to step into the same river again, they fail. Neither the river, nor themselves, are “the same” at each consecutive effort, even if the riverbanks and their mirror images in the water may seem to suggest the opposite.

<sup>2</sup>Sovran (1992) demonstrates that *sameness* is actually only possible in terms of *similarity*, in a world of irreversible time.

Obviously such uniqueness is not well fitted with the ideal of science of the last few centuries in European contexts. Science creates basic, universal knowledge that remains relatively stable. At the same time, psychological phenomena are transient. A thought crosses my mind (and vanishes), I feel happy at the sight of a beautiful scene, and so on. Here is the problem—which is also a solution—the *psyche* is profoundly constructive. It cannot simply repeat what has been experienced before—it necessarily adds a new nuance of the novel moment. Consequently, it creates many different forms of thinking and feeling, all of which may disappear. As a science, psychology needs to explain such rapidly passing moments.

However, this focus has not been understood in psychology. Just to the contrary, psychology has been built on the premise that such moments acquire relative permanence that allows these to be studied.<sup>3</sup> Of course, here psychology follows other sciences that are focused on stable objects of investigation. As any science, psychology needs to create universal knowledge. Such knowledge is abstract and stable, yet it may be about rapidly changing phenomena. The general know-how of a science needs to be adequate for not-yet-observed psychological phenomena, rather than account for only the (so far) observed ones.

## PSYCHOLOGY: A SCIENCE OF THE ZONE BETWEEN THE EXISTING AND THE POSSIBLE

In its recent history, psychology has prided itself as being a science of “the objective”, by which is usually meant something ephemeral, called “behavior.” While at the first moment the reliance on “behavior” seems solid and real—after all, the person who thinks about “behavior” is one who at the same time is involved in behaving, including thinking about “behavior”—the situation becomes more complicated when the realm of “behavior” needs to include a hypothetical opposite that cannot be observed.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly relevant as cultural psychology deals with higher psychological functions that are intentional in their nature. An actor may decide not to act in an expected way in some situation—the presence of non-action is equally relevant here to the case of action. Also, developmental perspectives in psychology need to include non-events—these “behaviors” that have not yet been observed, but can, in principle, come into being.

<sup>3</sup>Examples of such “making processes into things” abound in psychology: personality traits (see Arro, 2013; Uher, 2013), various versions of “intelligence”, attachment types, coping styles, etc.

<sup>4</sup>Of course psychologists can think of “non-behavior”—the absence of some form of behaving in moments where it is to be expected—but the concept of “anti-behavior” (in analogue with physicists thinking of “matter” and “anti-matter”) is not practiced (even if it is possible: see von Eye et al. (2009) on discovering “type” and “anti-type” even through statistical analyses). The use of the prefix “anti-” is habitually reserved in psychology to some behavior that is oriented against some barrier—a social norm, like “anti-social behavior,” where it indicates a *rupture* of some organizational form rather than an *oppositionally oriented part of the whole* (e.g. Tarde, 1897).

This issue arises in all developmental accounts of the *psyche*, including cultural psychology, where what is observable here-and-now is oriented towards some future occurrence. The latter is not yet in existence, but is likely to emerge.

Dealing with issues of emergence has been a puzzle for many sciences. For example, the emergence of organic matter out of anorganic chemical components in the history of the Earth is a theoretically complicated issue. Similarly, the precise understanding of the proceeding of the evolutionary process as it unfolds is a theoretical challenge. Yet in different sciences—astrophysics is a fitting example here—there has been no difficulty in developing general models that can be tested on the basis of phenomena that are theoretically expected to occur, but have not yet been observed. In addition, there is the relevance of something absent (“nothing”) next to something present (“something”). An architect building a purposeful hole into the design of a local commercial center uses the presence of “nothingness” (the hole) as a part of the design (Figure 1.1). When considering a donut, the whole in its middle is as much a part of its defining characteristics as the ring that surrounds the whole. The Gestalts of our world can include present and non-present parts as if both are present. Of course it is through our “culturally constructive” minds that we generate such Gestalts.

Psychology, however, has been unable to accept the centrality of nothingness as a part of something-ness—largely because it has socially prescribed the model of inductive generalization (rather than that of deductive, or abductive,<sup>5</sup> ways) as its basis of evidence. The inductive



**Figure 1.1** A designed hole as a part of the architectural building (commercial center at Zeil, Frankfurt-am-Main)

<sup>5</sup>The three ways of generalization are mutually complementary. *Inductive generalization* entails arriving at general ideas from experience with an increasing number (starting from 1) of observed instances. It overlooks the realm of possible (but not yet observed) instances. *Deductive generalization* entails “filling in” a general abstract scheme by observable instances, both actually observed and in principle observable. Deductive generalization is falsifiable by discovery of an instance that is not expected by the general abstract scheme. *Abductive generalization* is a hybrid of the former two. In the words of Charles S. Peirce, it takes the following form:

“It must be remembered that abduction, although it is very little hampered by logical rules, nevertheless is logical inference, asserting its conclusion only problematically or conjecturally, it is true, but nevertheless having a perfectly definite logical form. [...] The form of inference, therefore, is this: **The surprising fact, C, is observed; But if A were true, C would be a matter of course, Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.**” (*Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism*, CP 5.188–189, 1903/1997, bold added)

route to generalized knowledge requires the establishment of categories of phenomena within which each specimen is treated as if it were an equal member of the given class. This first act of generalization—replacing the notion “A1 and A2 *are similar*, belonging to class A” with “A1 and A2 *are equal* members of class A”—leads to the reduction of all generative<sup>6</sup> phenomena to those of physical phenomena. That generalizing move makes A1 and A2 *mutually substitutionable*: as equal members of class A, it does not matter where one or the other is taken to represent A.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, every person has one’s unique life history that is irreversibly lost in this generalization, which leads to substitution of heterogeneity by the notion of homogeneous classes.

## Pretending to be “an empirical science”: Vicissitudes of reliance upon induction

The very first act of inductive generalization in psychology introduces an irreversible shift in the ways in which psychological phenomena are looked at—variability becomes replaced by the notion of “true score”, and histories of the phenomena are eliminated from further consideration. Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed to the confusion in psychology quite precisely in his devastating critique of psychology as science:

The confusion and barrenness of psychology is not to be explained by calling it a “young science”... The existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problem which trouble us: though problem and method pass another by. (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 232<sup>8</sup>)

When the problems and methods pass each other by, we have no science, but a socially approved play of science that is similar to alchemy of the Middle Ages. Psychology has been in this state of confusion since its move to take over the image of the physical sciences and the

<sup>6</sup>All biological, psychological, sociological, and historical phenomena are *autopoietic* (self-generative) and produced increased inter-specimen variability.

<sup>7</sup>Such substitution is preferred by social institutions that need persons for specific functions, and do not consider their past or their future. For a military commander, it is important to operate with troops where every soldier left alive can substitute every other soldier who has been killed. Businesses fire people and hire others to fill specified roles.

<sup>8</sup>“Die Verwirrung und Öde der Psychologie ist nicht damit zu erklären, dass sie eine ‘junge Wissenschaft’ sei... Das Bestehen der experimentellen Methode last uns glauben, wir hätten das Mittel, die Probleme, die uns beunruhigen, loszuwerden; obgleich Problem und Methode windschief aneinander vorbei laufen” (ibid.).



proliferation of the statistical methods<sup>9</sup> as the scientific method for psychology. Despite periodic criticisms of such a course in the history of the discipline, the *movement away* from looking carefully at the personal experiencing processes of persons<sup>10</sup> has proliferated into the 21st century.

## THE ROADMAP OF CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

A correction for this course of movement can be introduced by the new hybrid discipline of cultural psychology, to the realm of which the readers of this book are invited. Cultural psychology emerges at the intersection of two sub-fields of psychology—developmental and social—with anthropology, history, sociology, sociolinguistics, and educational sciences as its nearest neighbors. Differently from the rest of psychology, which has preferred to look at the lower psychological functions—immediate perception, attention, behavior, and problem solving—cultural psychology orients itself to the study of higher psychological functions—those functions that entail the use of human will, the intentional construction of meaning. Cultural psychology also includes social norms, in their role of organizing the *psyche*, a feature that is irrelevant for other fields of psychology.<sup>11</sup> In cultural psychology, the accounts given by real human beings and those of invented persons—fictional characters in novels, films, and various ritualistic contexts—are treated as equally valuable sources of data. The creation—by a writer of fiction—of an invented character (e.g. Anna Karenina by Tolstoy) is as valuable as data for psychological analyses as interviews with Anna X in our present time, or returns to Anna O<sup>12</sup> in the writings of Sigmund Freud.

### Intentional actions in ordinary life contexts

Intentional actions are embedded in ordinary patterns of activity. The intention of going out of one's home in the morning leads to a sequence of ordinary practices—washing, dressing, having breakfast—that serve

<sup>9</sup>Best overviewed by Gigerenzer et al. (1989).

<sup>10</sup>For an effort to reverse this move, see Molenaar (2004).

<sup>11</sup>See Rom Harré's notion of normative psychology (Harré, 2012) that overcomes psychology's focus on direct causality in favor of cycles of normative guidance.

<sup>12</sup>See Cabell and Valsiner (2012) for an elaboration on the history of Anna O.



as arenas for making meaning of the day, oneself, and the world.<sup>13</sup> It is through meaningful acting within their environment—oriented towards the future—that human beings reconstruct their environments. Both “positive” reconstruction—that of new buildings, technological devices, etc.—and “negative” reconstruction—that of pollution, destruction of forests and historical values—emerge from such processes. The environment that was, now becomes re-organized into a new form. These forms have historical continuity that involves the preservation of the meaning system—the surviving Ancient Greek sculptures or temples carry with them some core of the meaning system that survives to our time. Such architectural objects—once fully functioning temples, but currently ruins—are complex signs that create a bridge between the past and the present:

The ruin of a building... means that where the work of art is dying, other forces and forms, those of nature, have grown; and that out of what of art still lives in the ruin and what of nature already lives in it, there has emerged a new whole, a characteristic unity. (Simmel, 1959a, p. 260)



**Figure 1.2** A deeply symbolic form in a daily context (a street entrance to a small temple in a side street of Kyoto, Japan)

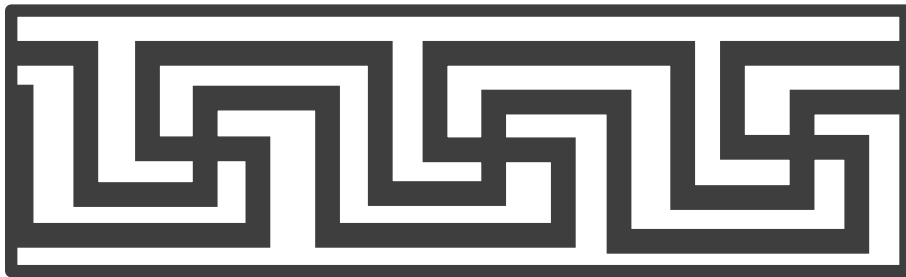
Thus, signs emerge, grow, and decay. Some graphic designs can undergo dramatic meaning transformation within short historical periods so that even a brief encounter with them by our contemporaries may trigger deeply affective streams of consciousness.

For any person from the Euro-American world after World War II, the image of the swastika can be deeply negatively emotiogenic—independent of one’s personal links with the atrocities of the war and of the Holocaust. In contrast, for people from the Orient, the

<sup>13</sup>Framing an ongoing everyday activity by meaning is most obvious in the case of secondary sign-making activity that accompanies the primary one. Thus, women singing while spinning cotton, or weaving, is a well-documented image of ordinary lives in European history. Singing frames the activity, and can serve as both the sign for its completion and a carry-over to similar activity. Thus, Jenu Kurumba (Nigiri Hills, South India) practices of honey-collecting are accompanied by a special song that is not otherwise sung (Demmer, 1997, p. 168), while narrative accounts of honey-gathering create the link of different honey-collecting episodes within the local community.

same symbolic form is deeply emotiogenic in the opposite direction—filling the person with happiness and calm (Figure 1.2). In the case of the swastika (*svastik*), the transformation of the image from a positive to a negative feeling trigger is historically traceable to the short period of Nazi ideological symbol formation from the 1920s to the 1940s that has cardinally transformed the meaning of the form for people of European connection.

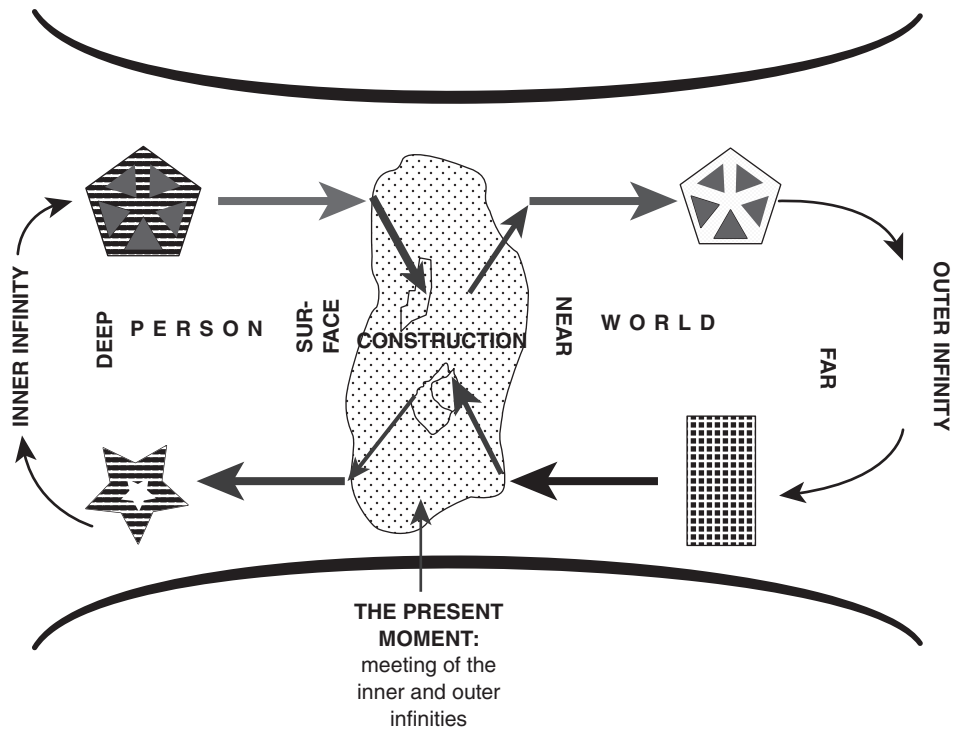
In the Oriental context, the *svastik* continues to bear its positive feeling, bringing fortune and good luck. Historically, images of the *svastik* were present in almost every society, from Ancient Mesopotamia and China to Ancient Rome, and beyond (Wilson, 1896; Loewenstein, 1941). Most often, its engravings are found on small everyday objects—pottery, bone cutting tools, etc.— which indicates their use as amulets of protection in activity contexts. The *svastik* image is discernible in ancient ornamentation (Figure 1.3).



**Figure 1.3** *Svastik* embedded in Ancient Greek ornament, 6th–5th century BC (Wilson, 1896, p. 839)

## Human experiencing as inherently ambivalent

Psychology has historically tried to reduce the complexity of the *psyche* into homogeneous classes—categories that are viewed as mutually exclusive. This fits the needs of common sense but does not capture the nature of the psychological phenomena that flourish at the border of the person and the world (Figure 1.4). Figure 1.4 is an elaboration of the personological idea brought to psychology by William Stern (1938). According to Stern, the *psyche* is constantly negotiated by two strivings—towards the “inner infinity” (the deep feeling of the person about the Self) and the “outer infinity” (imagination and knowledge of the



**Figure 1.4** The psyche in-between two infinities

world “out there”). Some of the latter is perceivable, yet much of it remains beyond the grasp of a particular person.

Stern’s account of the *psyche* was that of a personologist—someone who is interested in the continuity in human personality.<sup>14</sup> What cultural psychology—of the kind presented in this book—borrows from Stern is the focus on the *immediacy of the negotiation of the two infinities*. That negotiation takes place by constructing, using, and destroying signs. At each and every moment the person—in one’s present—coordinates the depth of one’s own *psyche* with the depth of the immediate environment. The act of praying in any religious

<sup>14</sup>William Stern—the leader of the personological focus in psychology—also was one of the 20th-century initiators of cultural psychology, the object of which he declared to be “the positive meaning-relationship of the soul and culture” (“positive Sinnbeziehung von Seele und Kultur”—Stern, 1935, p. 30).

context<sup>15</sup> (Figure 1.5) is the place where the person attempts to relate the infinity of one's subjective interior with the infinity of the meanings attributed to the given social setting. The latter is not merely that of a depicted—or, in other religious systems, in-principle not allowed to be presented as images<sup>16</sup>—deity in the given place, but the constructed ideal world beyond the immediate symbolic objects.

The general structure for the coordination of two uncertainties is depicted in Figure 1.6, where two oppositions—between SELF and OTHERS and between PAST and FUTURE—give rise to the inevitable uncertainty for human experiencing. The cultural psychology of semiotic mediation is based on *the axiom of centrality of the experiencing person*—it is the human subjectivity that is the arena for all human experiencing. In this, the cultural psychology of semiotic mediation is person-centered—and continuous with William Stern's personological account (Figure 1.4). Nevertheless it transcends the barrier between the SELF and the OTHERS: at every moment, on the plane of the PRESENT, the person addresses some others—real or non-real,



**Figure 1.5** A young Chinese woman praying in front of a Kannon figure in Shanghai

<sup>15</sup>Prayer is a socially constructed framework for negotiating the two infinities in terms that go beyond the immediate present through the actions within that immediate present setting. As Roger Bastide elaborates, prayer includes three stages:

“First, it is an incantation: by expressing his desire, the sorcerer acts on the elements or the gods and bends them to his will. The request is effective in itself. By being named, the god becomes dependent, since... its name is an integral part of its personality. Next there is the idea of a contract or bargain, and the prayer becomes a request ‘O God, please...O ancestors, we ask you that...’ The formula is repeated monotonously, and initially the request is not for spiritual benefits but material goods, peace, rain, or the death of an enemy. To the prayer request are gradually added prayers of worship and offering. This evolution can be followed through the lyric poetry of the Greeks, the hymns of Theognis and Cleanthes, the philosophy of the stoics, the prayers of Seneca and Epictetus, and also in Hebrew psalms.” (Bastide, 2003, pp. 106–107)

<sup>16</sup>Islamic faith prohibits the pictorial presentations of deities. In a similar vein, Occidental Christianity has gone through waves of outlawing the use of pictorial images in various forms of iconoclastic movements (e.g. Louthan, 2005).

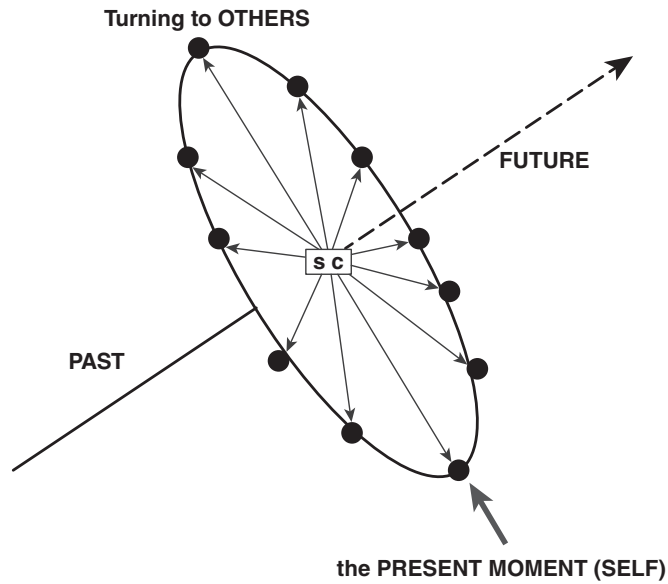
present or not present—and *through such social referencing* constructs one's understanding and acting towards the future. It is in this focus on SELF living *through the OTHER* that cultural psychology becomes distinct from personology.

The person is not “influenced by” the others (and is not “influencing” the others). Instead of a simple causal arrow—from person to the others, or vice versa—we have a constructive loop of the person relating with the other(s), through creating meaning of the other (“beloved grandmother”), projecting into them (“my father is as afraid of life as I am”), empathizing with the other (“that poor beggar I passed on the Main Street”), and acting towards the other (feeding, grooming, or killing<sup>17</sup> them). Relating to the other in these forms amounts to relating—through them—back to oneself.

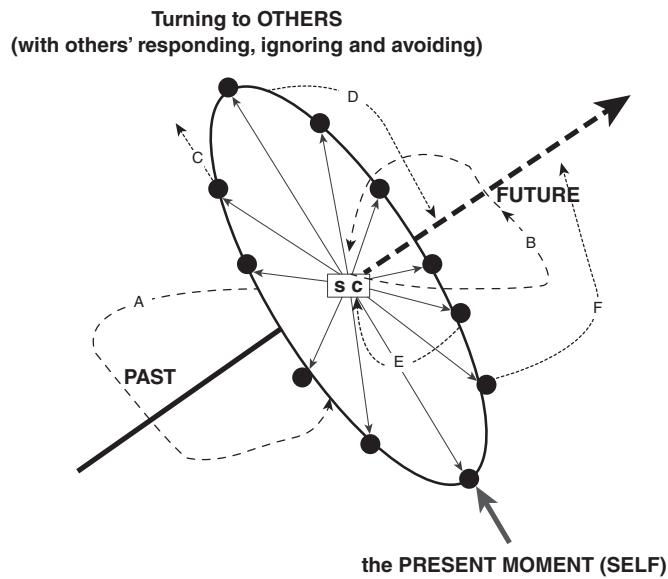
However, the realm of the OTHERS is not a homogeneous or predictable domain. By turning to them, the person faces the uncertainty of their responsivity—and their goals-oriented action in relation to the experiencing person. The person is the center of one's life-field, involved in acting within it and selectively referencing others who are present in that world. However, the act of social referencing is inherently uncertain. In Figure 1.6, some of the “others” (C in Figure 1.7) may “escape” from the referencing effort of the person. For example, the Self turns to a friend for help, but the friend (C) refuses or avoids him/her. At the same time, some others (E) may respond immediately in the here-and-now predicament. For example, the mother of SC is ready to immediately help SC. Yet there are further other agents in the field (D, F) who may be potentially positioned to respond later as the future is turning into the next present.

Many of the others ignore the referencing. The person who turns to the others performs a strategic act, revealing some aspects of one's reasons for such a turn to some (e.g. to grandparents but not to parents, or to peers and not to parents), hiding from others (e.g. from a teacher, or a boss), and misinforming some others (e.g. the traffic policeman or tax collector). “Being social” is not equal to “participating in the social context” (or “joining society”); rather, it is a person-centered, calculated,

<sup>17</sup>As human activities involve both construction and destruction, killing living beings is a major culturally organized activity that is both regulated by action norms and intra-psychological sense-making scenarios that make killing possible (Zimmermann and Valsiner, 2009). Killing for turning living matter into food is widespread in the non-vegetarian alimentation cycle—farm animals are slaughtered and feral animals are hunted. Yet in the act of killing a hunted animal one finds an emphatic process that proceeds from the hunter through the hunted forward to the hunter again (Willerslev, 2007, pp. 100–114, on mimetic empathy with prey among Yukaghir hunters in Siberia).



**Figure 1.6** The structure of uncertainties in human lives: SELF<>OTHERS and PAST<>FUTURE (SC = Self as Center, turning towards various others around her/him)



**Figure 1.7** Coordination within double uncertainty SELF<>OTHERS and PAST<>FUTURE (SC = Self as Center)

goals-oriented movement through the social field with all of its constraints and affordances.

While the SELF<>OTHER dialogue continues in the subjective domain (SC in Figures 1.6 and 1.7), the person simultaneously references one's past (A) in efforts to predict and construct one's future (B). This is the essence of socially assisted development—where the person is the center. The person is the active agent in one's life—constructing one's future through selectively referencing the past and turning to others in the process of social referencing.

## THE NATURE OF THE CORE OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE: THE STEM CONCEPTS

The human self is a result of the agent being able to reflect upon oneself. It is in this capacity that human beings differ from other species.<sup>18</sup> Such self-reflexivity is inherently ambiguous, including both the fear and desire to find out something new about the object, which is oneself. As Abraham Maslow has mentioned:

More than any other kind of knowledge we fear knowledge of ourselves, knowledge that might transform our self-esteem and our self-image. A cat finds it easy to be a cat, as nearly as we can tell. It isn't afraid to be a cat. But being a full human being is difficult, frightening, problematical. While human beings love knowledge and seek it—they are curious—they also fear it. The closer to the personal it is, the more they fear it. (Maslow, 1966, p. 16)

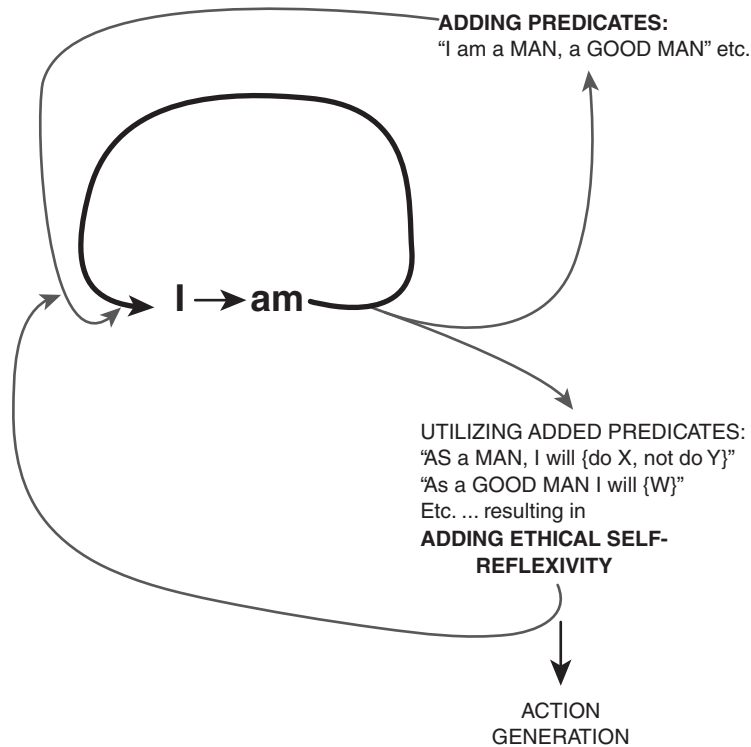
The process of self-reflection is based on the carrier meanings—abstract, over-generalized notions that the self uses to make distinctions. Reliance on such meanings is recognition of the self's actual existence—by oneself. How does this happen?

In order to arrive at any statement about self, there needs to be the core maintenance of the reflection of the existence of the self over some duration in irreversible time—the maintenance of the stem concept I AM. This maintenance requires a cyclical process of feeding the information into the self: that animal *over there* (mirror) is not another animal, but myself.<sup>19</sup> I AM here—my reflection is there—and

<sup>18</sup>With the possible exception of higher primates (see C. Boesch, 2012).

<sup>19</sup>This feature is utilized in the testing of primates' and young babies' self-recognition—a dot is put on their face, and their image is shown to them in the mirror. If they pay attention to the dot on the basis of the mirror image, then they recognize themselves in the image.





**Figure 1.8** Adding predicates to the I → AM cycle

I AM HERE. Or my mother *over there* imitates my (baby) vocalization *here* turning it into a mutual vocal game of a back-and-forth vocal dialogue.<sup>20</sup>

Once the I AM stem concept is established, it serves as the basis for binding different predicates to itself, while maintaining its own stability (Figure 1.8). Here we reverse the excessively quoted Cartesian dictum *cogito, ergo sum* and see the possibility of thinking (and self-consciousness) through the architecture of the process that makes it possible—I AM, therefore I (can) think.

How does the "I" emerge? I here posit the need for reaching stability through stabilizing one's agentive role over time. In other terms, any

<sup>20</sup>Of course, the baby here is not conscious of this process, but is drawn into it by mechanisms of persistent imitation. This is a context in human ontogeny where *illusory intersubjectivity* (see Rommetveit, 1992) gives rise to social interaction routines that establish the *actual intersubjectivity*—and enhances self-reflexivity of the interacting partners.

future-oriented goals-related action creates an *extended duration*<sup>21</sup> that makes it possible to create the (dynamically) stable cycle **I (now) → I (next moment) →**, etc. continuity. From that extended duration emerges the self-reflexive moment of looking at **I (now-and-then past moment) → I AM → I (next moment)**. The emerging I thus becomes possible thanks to memory (extended duration) and self-oriented abstraction from the continuous I that is relating to itself. And results in the cycle **I → AM → I →**, etc. (see Figure 1.8).

Further development of the I-system entails bonding different predicates—characteristics that further specify the nature of the self-reflection. Adding (and abandoning) new predicates to the I AM cycle maintains the cycle while being always new.<sup>22</sup> As the predicates are signs—of any type or combination—the *self can exist only as a result of semiotic (self) mediation*. Such mediation is an emergent property in the course of anthropogenesis—a result of the developing species to counter the limits set upon their lives by the reality of the irreversible nature of living time.

Yet, as the person operates at the border of time (PAST | FUTURE), the primary stem concept I AM is not sufficient for existing in a world of constant changes. If the person were limited to **I-AM → {predicate X} → I-AM...** system only, no action upon the world would follow. The person would be a hostage to the environmental conditions, registering new qualities of oneself under the influence of the environment. The self would be self-centered as an end point in itself, while the stem concept I AM makes it possible for the person who reflects upon one's being only and is not active towards the world. The scenario of a fully functioning **I-AM → {predicate X} → I-AM...** system in responding to the input from the environment is that of a passive self-labeling that does not relate to any action. Such a person stumbles upon an obstacle and falls—and accepts the predicate “careless” into the cycle. Somebody lifts the fallen person and gives care—the predicate “thankful” becomes added. The person operating within the system is endlessly self-descriptive *without the predicates becoming semiotic mediators for action*. Yet the potential to turn to action is prepared through these concepts. The I-AM needs to become complemented with other stem concepts (Figure 1.9).

The stem concept I-NEED is likewise a cycle of self-maintaining kind (like I-AM in Figure 1.9), yet it is oriented to an *object that is not*

<sup>21</sup>In the sense of Henri Bergson's *durée*—the memory of the body needs to gain stability over irreversible time to make adding self-reflexivity possible.

<sup>22</sup>Such adding of predicates releases the process of *hypostatic abstraction* (C. S. Peirce's term—see Neuman, 2009, p. 20) that transformed the added predicates (e.g. “I am happy”) into entities that are projected into the “I” (e.g. “I have HAPPINESS”). Psychology is filled with concepts that are the results of such a form of abstraction, rendering it as science vulnerable to the limits of the common sense.



Figure 1.9 Stem concepts of human cultural self-organization

*present* at this time. The I NEED stem concept introduces the move from the present towards the future, yet it remains framed by the I AM concept: I AM {I NEED → I DESIRE} → X. The recognition of a need is oriented to the future, but is not necessarily leading to action that fulfils the need. It is the I WANT stem concept that brings a need to self-reflexivity. I WANT is likewise oriented to the future, but is not action-prone. A person can operate in a cycle of attaching predicates to the I WANT cycle (e.g. “I want to go to the Moon”, “I want to be a millionaire”, “I want children”, “I want peace for the whole world”), yet without any action other than talk about what one wants. This is similar to talk about needs: “I need X, Y, Z” does not mean that the person moves beyond the process of attaching predicates to the stem concept.

Finally, the I WILL stem concept links the person with some (promised, but not necessarily carried out) action. Thus, imagine a polite robber explaining his intentions to you:

“I am poor” →  
 “I need money” →  
 “I want your wallet →  
 “I will kill you if  
 you do not give  
 me what I {want/  
 need}”

The four basic stem concepts can be combined in many ways, and each can grow a complex structure of meanings around their primary role—the binding of predicates. It is into this relationship of the stem concepts that social norms<sup>23</sup> become inserted, either prohibiting or enforcing an action. Thus, the example above may become slightly different:

<sup>23</sup>Social norms are constructed in activity contexts (Sherif, 1936), socially coordinated, and maintained or abandoned by the actors as the given situation demands. They function through meanings—semiotic mediators—that regulate their functioning. Human psychology can only be conceptualized as normative psychology (Brinkmann, 2011, 2012; Harré et al., 2012). The imperatives I (YOU) SHOULD and I (YOU) MAY NOT are maintained as non-doubtable meanings.

“I **am** poor” →

“I **need** money” →

“I **want** your wallet →

“I **would** kill you if you do not give me what I {want/need}” “**BUT I will NOT** kill you since this is prohibited by X {god, social norms, etc.}”

The last part of the meaning-making is built upon the role of social normativity in human lives, and constitutes a *circumvention strategy*<sup>24</sup>—a way to reverse a particular direction of feeling and thinking. A person creates a self-protection device under circumstances of uncertainty—through bringing into the given situation a meaning that “pacifies” the anxiety produced by the first idea:

“I **wonder** if I locked my door when I left home”

{worry, anxiety, inability to remember precisely}

“I **think I did** lock my door” (circumvention strategy)

The person has no new evidence about the state of the matter, but the self-persuasive circumvention strategy operates upon the feelings created by the first idea. Circumvention strategy *enables* the proceeding of the sense-making process. Likewise, the person can create a *semiotic block*—a meaning that limits the meaningful relating to the world to specific constraints (see Chapter 6).

## THE SELF AS CULTURALLY REGULATED: MEANING HIERARCHIES IN ACTION

The cultural psychology of *dynamic semiosis* is the direction about which the readers of this book are invited to join in and discover. It considers the human Self to be dialogical in nature and hierarchically regulated through the transient hierarchies of signs. An example of

<sup>24</sup>The notion of circumvention strategy was introduced in 1998 (Josephs and Valsiner, 1998) as an example of the ways in which affectively laden ideas can be coped with in the stream of consciousness.

construction of such meaning systems comes from the study of fears conducted by G. Stanley Hall in the end of the 19th century:

An English lady teacher writes, as a child “I had a strange idea of safety when I was alone in the dark. I always imagined that at each corner of my bed there was a lion, who was always on the alert to fight the ceaseless number of tigers and snakes which I fancied were prowling up stairs all night; so long as the lions were there I felt safe, *but if I thought one disappeared I would lie awake in dreadful fear that the others would not be enough to struggle with the tigers*” (Subject #37 in Hall, 1897, p. 185, emphasis added)

This particular meaning structure is remarkable, both by its creativity of the empowerment scenario (all four lions) and by its working out of the potential danger scenario (if one of them were to be lost). Thus, a primary worry is overcome, and subsequently regained, albeit in a new form.

The hierarchical nature of the Self-regulation system makes it possible to be *productively inconsistent* within one’s self. Contrary to the stern expectations of schoolmasters, politicians, or even psychologists to be “internally solid” and “logical” in their ways of thinking, people are just the opposite. The hierarchy of the intransitive kind<sup>25</sup> is the major form of the semi-otic regulatory system. Thus, a person may know of an expectation, or a norm, or even expect it from others, but not use it oneself. For example, a young Pakistani immigrant woman, who has grown up in Norway, talks about the need to change clothes in a same-gender public setting (e.g. before a physical education class). Selma, an aspiring athlete, explains:

For me the body is sacred, so you should not undress in front of each other. *But I do. I don’t care*, but I do understand the others pretty well, because they are raised like that. “Why should I show my body to others?” – sort of. (Strandbu, 2005, p. 35, emphasis added)

Aside from the use of circumvention strategy (“I don’t care”), we see here the de-centration of Selma’s own perspective from the cultural norm. Her overcoming of the binding of the norm for herself allows her to negotiate her autonomy in the participation in the secular life context (basketball).

## Cultural action as dynamic dramatization

Negotiation of social norms requires acting within a social context—turning to the others (Figure 1.8). The others are related to the Self in different ways, at different distances, in different power roles. Reaching

<sup>25</sup>Where the condition of transitivity does not apply, i.e.  $A > B$  and  $B > C$ , it does not follow (transitivity) that  $A > C$ , but may follow that  $C > A$  (which results in a cycle) (Poddiakov and Valsiner, 2013).

their attention may depend upon the specific tactics used—and counter-used. Children—the loved futures of the parents who nevertheless are most subservient to the parents—learn to dramatize their meaningful quests in social settings. Fatima Mernissi remembers from her Moroccan childhood how the children could get permission to go out (to the cinema):

We children were not usually allowed to go to the movies either, but we staged our own revolts, just like the women, and sometimes were finally granted permission. When I say “we,” I mean Samir really, for I had a problem with screaming at grownups and showing my displeasure by jumping up and down like he did, or better still, rolling on the floor and kicking bystanders. Staging sedition was a tricky business and never stopped being so for me, if only because of Mother’s strange attitude. Often she encouraged me to rebel, and kept repeating that relying on Samir to be aggressive for the both of us would not do. **But whenever I threw myself on the floor and started screaming at her, she would stop me on the spot. “I did not say you ought to rebel against me! You should rebel against all the others, but you still have to obey your mother. Otherwise, it would lead to chaos. And in any case, you should not rebel stupidly. You ought to carefully consider the situation, and analyze everything. Rebel when you know there is some chance you may win.”** After that, I spent much energy analyzing my chances to win whenever it became evident that these people were taking advantage of me, but even today, almost a half-century later, the answers I come up with are always the same: inconclusive. (Mernissi, 1994, p. 117 emphasis and bold added)

Dramatization entails creating an attention-catching focal point in the given social context. Human lives are filled with dramas—from the temper-tantrum of a toddler in the middle of a supermarket to the daily declarations of loyalty to the country, or from watching an opera in the theatre to joining the theatre of war as an enthusiastic soldier. Religious services in any system of faith dramatize all major events in the human life course—and after its end. All these dramas are made meaningful by the particular semiosphere<sup>26</sup> within which they are staged. All the participants are simultaneously “theatre directors”, “actors” and “the audience”, alternating the roles as the stage is being set.

<sup>26</sup>A concept introduced into semiotics by Juri Lotman (1990, 1992), the originator of the Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics, in an analogy with biosphere.

## CONCLUSION: WHY PSYCHOLOGY IN A NEW KEY?

In this chapter I have set up the preliminaries for looking at psychology as a science of human conduct mediated through signs from beginning to end, and from one time moment to the next in irreversible time. This perspective is not new. In fact, all psychology in the 19th century emerged as a social science, looking at human relations with their social world (Valsiner, 2012). Human beings are unstoppable generators of signs as they strive towards future objectives which, by their nature, are necessarily uncertain. They live within their semiospheres—in parallel to all living biological organisms thanks to their mutual relations with the biosphere. The rest of this book is meant to chart such a construction of human beings—and societies—through such meaning-making activity. All phenomena of manifest kind—usually subsumed under the blanket term *behavior*—are subordinate to that cultural process of irresistible meaning-making (and re-making). **Behavior is not objective, but subjective**—through the meanings linked with it. This psychology in the new key transcends both the traditions of assuming the objectivity of behavior (as the behaviorist traditions have assumed) and treating the human psyche as a complete social construction (which has been the hallmark of radical social constructionist belief). Instead of that—either/or—looks at behavior as **conduct**—actions in the world that are made meaningful by the acting human being. **Human psychology is the science of human conduct** and not of behavior, or of cognition. This invitation to cultural psychology is thus the core of general psychology as a *Wissenschaft* of the human condition.