

Chapter 11

Toward an Abstracting Conceptual Enterprise



Maria C. D. P. Lyra and Marina Assis Pinheiro

Cultural Psychology of Semiotic Dynamics (CPSD) offers a theoretical framework to support how to apprehend and understand human experience that constructs selves and cultural world as semiotic processes. As a basic science, as an epistemological-theoretical and methodological arena of transdisciplinary, seeking for reconstructing the hermeneutics of human singularity and its differences from natural sciences, it is inevitable the construction of “new” (or, more critically, old challenges) such as generalizable mechanisms/processes in a grammar that overcomes the mainstream vocabulary centered in a problematic individualistic and causal perspective. This task aims a twofold enterprise regarding the abstractive process required for generalization: firstly, to focus on how the unique subject emerges in his/her cultural contingency and his/her constant adaptation to the future of self’s experiences – and, therefore, the maintenance and transformation of the sociocultural world – through semiotic processes, initially affective and subsequently cognitive (Valsiner, this book, 2007, 2014). This approach has the challenge of grasping the successive transformation that human being does from the very first sense experience and the subsequent affective-perceptive moment, developing toward language use and cognition, modeling it through semiotic dynamics.

For this reason, the scientific enterprise of CPSD must develop toward two fundamental assumptions: firstly, to apprehend the subjective and individual process of meaning-making that leads to abstraction – and therefore generalization – considering the subjective world of the uniqueness of personal culture (Valsiner, 2007, 2014) and secondly, on the basis of this phenomenon, to construct a scientific theoretical cultural psychology as a basic science of semiotic dynamics. In other words,

M. C. D. P. Lyra (✉)

LabCCom - Federal University of Pernambuco, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil

M. A. Pinheiro

Federal University of Pernambuco, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil

it is the semiotic dynamic between the self and culture that gives rise to the scientific construction however at diverse levels. One refers to the methodology used to apprehend the phenomenon and the other at the conceptual construction that creates a theoretical basic science of human development that guides future advances in the area.

Abstraction and Meaning Construction: Methodological Challenges

This first aspect deals with the way on how to apprehend the subjective and individual process of meaning construction and its abstraction and generalization that take place in the particular universe of each single self. This point refers to the methodology used and will focus on the type of logical inference that is proposed by Peirce as implying the abductive logics exemplifying it in a concrete example. It is through abduction, many times highlighted by Valsiner (2007, 2014), that the logical reasoning required for new discovers regarding CPSD occurs.

Abduction is, after all, nothing but guessing. We are therefore bound to hope that, although the possible explanations of our facts may be strictly innumerable yet our mind will be able, in some finite number of guesses, to guess the sole true explanation of them. *That* we are bound to assume, independently of any evidences that is true. Animated by that hope, we are to proceed to construction of hypothesis. (Peirce in Valsiner, 2017, p. 110)

According to Salvatore (2014), CPSD needs to be guided by abductive logics or abductive inference (abstractive generalization, as Salvatore calls it) that supports a methodological framework that will lead to infer from the phenomenon observed the possible comprehension. Moreover, it is important also to observe the limit of variability inherent to the phenomenon.

The first author of this text has an interesting example of abduction that has led to a paper recently appeared (Lyra, Valério, & Wagoner, 2018). We were studying life trajectories of couples that decided to adopt a child, using the Trajectory Equifinality Model – TEM (proposed by Sato and collaborators) (Sato & Valsiner, 2010; Sato, Hidaka, & Fukuda, 2009; Sato, Mori, & Valsiner, 2016). We were expecting to find one trajectory for each couple that contains bifurcation points. Nevertheless, we found two parallel trajectories for the two and three couples studied – one of them two parallel trajectories and for the other three parallel ones. At this moment we were really surprised because all the works using TEM claim that just one trajectory is actualized. Others are imagined by not in fact realized.

Because we were surprised, it came the idea that if meaning-making has a strong role for guiding person's life, it could be that it was the meaning the couple constructed regarding "to adopt a child" that could be the reason for the concomitant trajectories. Moreover, these diverse meanings concerning adoption – diverse for each of the two couples – seem to be available, at the same time as possibilities displayed at the collective level of the sociocultural environment. Thus, the adop-

tion process following the inscription of the Brazilian Register of Adoption requires to obey the actual law. This last one, the current law, exists simultaneously with the old style of adoption in Brazilian history, which means to find a child in any place available. This last way of adopting is also in the mind of the shelter attendants and the family and members of the community, mainly within the poor population.

We think that the example described above exhibits the work of an abductive reasoning. It creates new understanding regarding life trajectories due to the guidance of an abductive logic that was methodologically adopted.

Blocking Remembering-Imagination

The second point that we want to highlight refers to how the process of self's unique meaning construction leads to abstraction-generalization. Such dynamics takes place at the subjective world of selves, constructing a personal culture relying on memory as pre-presentation and imagination as preparation for the future.

Memory as reconstruction of past experience – pointed out by Bartlett (1932) and recently well developed by Wagoner and collaborators (2015, 2017) – and imagination are basic psychological processes for CPSD. The pre-presentation of the future relying in past experiences and the forward movement due to imagining possible (and impossible) futures are the source or the semiotic “material” worked by selves in order to construct a meaningful life trajectory. Nevertheless, sometimes both remembering and imagining are blocked. We think that the study of how and why the impossibility of remembering and the impossibility of imagining needs to be explored inside the framework of CPSD. In order to exhibit an example of these (im)possibilities, or a blocking phenomenon, we will approach a case of literature, provided by the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim in the book *Surviving the Holocaust* (1986). The author, himself, a Jewish survivor of a German concentration camp, wondered, what made so many face death, resisting to such inhuman extreme situations, whereas others died in short time under same conditions? In his understanding, one of the major hypotheses was that the survivors kept, even under such violent regime, an inner belief, an imagined set of uncertain future of reencountering their ruined lives, their devastated homes, and their own names. However, it was the impossibility of recovering any sense of self, the defensive blocked memory about who they were and who they would become, that made impossible to keep themselves alive, attending to the desire of Holocaust. We understand this description as an indication that subject constructs limits for the possibility of imagining themselves that is a result of an interaction between personal history and sociocultural environment that offers the limits for both remembering and imagining.

It is the limits of knowledge like in such questions and open hypotheses that make science move forward in its development. We hope that this book will inspire the reader in recovering the centrality of human experience in psychology, triggering new challenges, and amplifying the concept of us.

References

- Bartlett, F. C. (1932). *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*. Cambridge, UK: CUP.
- Bettelheim, B. (1986). *Surviving the holocaust*. New York: Flamingo.
- Lyra, M. C. D. P., Valério, T., & Wagoner, B. (2018). Pathways to life course changes: Introducing the concept of avenues of directive meaning. *Culture & Psychology*, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1354067X18779060>. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X18779060>
- Salvatore, S. (2014). The mounting of cultural and the mouse of empirical studies. Methodological considerations for birth control. *Culture & Psychology*, *20*(4), 477–500.
- Sato, T., Hidaka, T., & Fukuda, M. (2009). Depicting the dynamics of living the life: The trajectory equifinality model. In J. Valsiner, P. Molenaar, M. Lyra, & N. Chaudhary (Eds.), *Dynamic process methodology in the social and developmental sciences* (pp. 217–240). New York: Springer.
- Sato, T., Mori, N., & Valsiner, J. (Eds.). (2016). *Making of the future: The trajectory equifinality model in cultural psychology*. Charlotte, NC: IAP.
- Sato, T., & Valsiner, J. (2010). Time in life and life in time: Between experiencing and accounting. *Ritsumeikan Journal of Human Sciences*, *20*, 79–92.
- Valsiner, J. (2007). *Culture in minds and societies: Foundations of cultural psychology*. New Delhi, India: Sage.
- Valsiner, J. (2014). *An invitation to cultural psychology*. London: SAGE.
- Valsiner, J. (2017). *Between self and societies: Creating psychology in a new key*. Tallin, Estonia: Tallin University Press.
- Wagoner, B. (2015). Collective remembering as a process of social representation. In G. Sammut, E. Andreouli, G. Gaskell, & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *Cambridge handbook of social representations* (pp. 143–162). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Wagoner, B. (2017). *The constructive mind: Bartlett's psychology in reconstruction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.