Hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields: The Generative Power of a Construct

Angela Uchoa Branco

Valsiner's contributions to Cultural Psychology are plural and diverse, as they open up new venues for the advancement of a scientific understanding of human beings' psyche. His theoretical and methodological elaborations, continuously progressing along new rounds of insightful and reflexive thinking, have provided a productive and coherent framework for interpreting the complex and systemic nature of the mutually constitutive processes at play between the development of people and cultural contexts. Here I will address one of Valsiner's major contributions to make sense of such mutual constitution, namely, the central role of Affective-Semiotic Fields—especially those of hypergeneralized kind—for the active and dynamic co-construction of the individual's Dialogical Self. The role of hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields in guiding human perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and conducts cannot be overestimated and, therefore, deserves a closer analysis and further theoretical elaborations, thanks to the fruitfulness of the concept. It represents—from a Cultural Psychology perspective—a fresh conceptual light upon constructs such as values and prejudices and allows for the investigation of those ontogenetic processes involved in their emergence and development.

Since the last two decades of the twentieth century, new perspectives in Psychology as a scientific study of human beings have emerged under the broad denomination of Cultural Psychology. Vygotsky's and Bruner's seminal contributions to this new approach have, ever since, expanded in numerous interesting directions, among which the work of Jaan Valsiner and his productive cultural semiotic approach. From his very first book in 1987—*Culture and the Development of Children's Action*—alongside so many seminal others (Valsiner, 1989, 1998, 2007, 2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2019a to mention just a few), Valsiner masterly elaborated on the complex and systemic ways through which human psyche emerges and

A. U. Branco (✉)
University of Brasília, Brasília, Brazil

develops as a mutual constitution between subjects and cultural contexts, continuously taking place in the irreversible time.

Valsiner's (2012, 2014) understanding of the centrality of *meaning making processes*—Bruner's major contribution (Bruner, 1993)—goes further and deeper as he examines in detail the dialogical construction, or reciprocal construction, of dynamic meanings occurring in communication processes that take place in social practices within historical-culturally structured contexts. His work, which theoretically borrowed from Peircean semiotic perspective (Peirce, 1997), definitely sheds a new light on the study of *semiotics* itself, as Valsiner underlines the key role played by affective processes in the social co-construction of meanings. This core idea, hence, advances a fruitful psychological approach to the topic of semiotics, especially encouraging the investigation of meaning-making processes vis-à-vis human development. His theoretical elaborations on how *cultural canalization* processes provide possible directions to human development, yet keeping an openness to alternative routes related to life's indeterministic processes, put forward a new basis for the construction of a scientific framework absolutely sensitive to processes of human development. By stressing the multiple, complex, and systemically organized nature of developmental processes and dimensions, Valsiner's perspective articulates such complex multiplicity in coherent and thoughtful ways to make sense of human beings' development (Valsiner, 2014, 2017b). From the author's dialogical standpoint, cultural canalization processes—translated into incentives and constraints present in powerful cultural messages—do not operate solo, since all individuals are *active* and *constructive*, in different ways, in relation to their own development. Through transformative *internalization* and *externalization* processes, subjects and cultures co-construct each other by the simultaneous action of *cultural canalization* and subject's *agency* (it is worth noticing, though, that such agency not necessarily means intentionality).

Together with Robert Cairns (Valsiner & Cairns, 1992), Valsiner introduced a new concept in Psychology that has been extremely successful to deal with the complex and apparently contradictory nature of popular constructs in our field. I refer to the concept of *inclusive separation*, according to which apparently opposite psychological constructs such as "individual" versus "collective," "cooperative" versus "competitive," and "good" versus "bad," in fact, consist of aspects of broader whole phenomena. Human phenomena should, therefore, be conceptualized as open systems that encompass a range of specific phenomena that are interconnected, interdependent of each other, and located along a continuum between two contrasting poles. For instance, individual and collective beliefs cannot be opposed to each other, since culture and the subject are related and constitute each other, namely, culture exists in the individual, and the individual exists in culture. For the purpose of analysis, we can designate a society as more individualist or collectivist, due to the proportion of social practices oriented by individualism or collectivism prevalent in its context. However, each adjective cannot be used theoretically to designate two separate or opposing phenomena. Not only a broad scope of possible hybrid combinations between the two

contrasting positions can be observed in different societies, but also the dynamicity existing within the phenomenon conceived as a system gives rise to constant changes and innovative characteristics detected as the phenomenon unfolds along the irreversible time.

Valsiner explains that it is not possible to fully understand any aspect of human conduct or psychological phenomena if the whole system encompassing such apparently opposite, dialogical poles is not taken into consideration. The general background provided by this holistic view of human phenomena, therefore, opens up an all-embracing and comprehensive understanding of how *micro*, *meso*, and *micro* dimensions interlace with each other to bring about human development. Hence the need to incorporate in psychology investigative efforts to make sense of the interplay between all three—macro, meso, and micro—levels of analysis.

Recently, many researchers have focused their research interests on people's increasing tendency, at least in Western societies, to use anti-social and violent ways to deal with interpersonal conflicts (Galtung, 1990; Sue, 2010). The search for one or various specific causes of this phenomenon does not make sense, because all factors involved are situated at the different levels of a same systemic organization. We need to take into account the complex interconnected factors related to the broader culture, encompassing its major orienting goals (macro level); its structured and dynamic institutional characteristics, norms, and rules (meso level); and the various, diverse micro systems or specific contexts within which people live their daily experiences (micro level). As all elements, aspects and levels of the open system are interdependent and permanently affect each other, and as their hierarchical positions dynamically change as both people and society move and develop through time, the only way to make sense of the phenomena under investigation is to examine all the possible relevant factors located at the macro, meso, and micro levels of the system. In our research on the increasing tendency of anti-social patterns of social interactions, we first aim at identifying those historical, structural, and axiological aspects of the broader culture, their impact over the institutionalized organization of the societies themselves, and the plural, heterogeneous proximal processes through which cultural canalization takes place and promotes internalization and externalization of specific actions and interactions. In short, we need to target the analysis of globalization processes and capitalism in its recent complex versions, the study of social institutions, their structure and normative rules, as well as those practices and co-constructed values and prejudices that emerge from everyday social interactions among people.

Next, I will focus upon the theoretical construct proposed by Valsiner—*Affective-Semiotic Fields*—and why this productive psychological construct can generate a better understanding of complex developmental processes such as the ontogenesis of values and the development of the Dialogical Self.

1 Valsiner's Self-Regulatory Model and Hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields
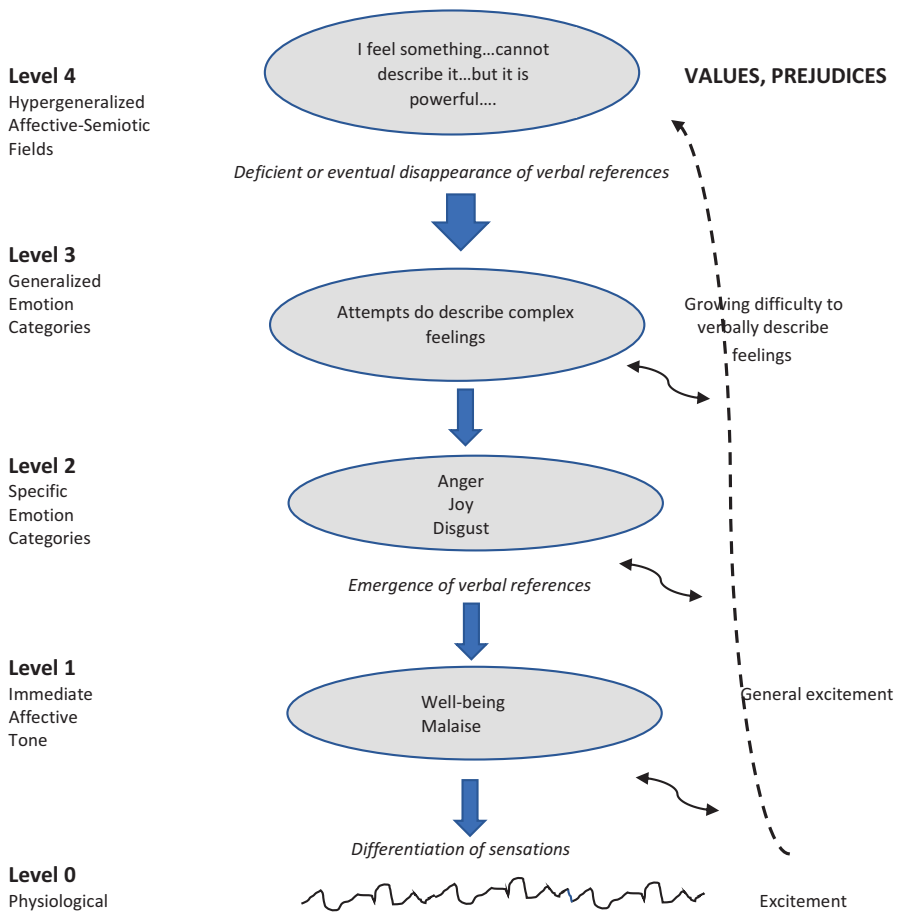
Among Valsiner's contributions for the advancement of psychological science, I wish to underline in this chapter one of his key generative ideas, which lie at the very basis of present empirical and theoretical efforts (Branco & Valsiner 2010; Branco et al., 2020; Roncancio-Moreno, 2015).

Valsiner has especially borrowed the concept of "field" in psychology from the work of Kurt Lewin (1965). However, he has expanded and elaborated the concept far beyond Lewin's theoretical perspective, for he frames the notion of field within an innovative approach to the issue of semiosis—he highlights the deep, affect-laden origins of semiosis and the central role of affective-semiosis in making sense of psychological phenomena (Valsiner 2001, 2014). Moreover, his own use of the construct—*field*—is absolutely conceptualized within a sociogenetic, dialogical cultural perspective that contextualizes it in distinctive ways. Fields are particularly compatible to a theoretical viewpoint that stresses the fluid, fuzzy, and dynamic flow of interdependent processes, occurring within the Dialogical Self System as it interacts with different aspects of developing cultural contexts. A field then represents a semi-structured psychological region that organizes the operation of complex processes, being defined by blurred, permeable, and somewhat undefinable boundaries that allow for both the maintenance *and* the transformation of themselves. As they do so, they promote the development of the whole Self system along the irreversible time.

Charles S. Peirce's semiotic theory also contributed significantly to Valsiner's innovative thinking in psychology (Valsiner, 2014). It assisted the author to establish relevant connections between culture, dialogical meaning construction, affective-cognitive processes, and Self development in order to propose a robust theoretical project for psychology as a science of human development. Building on Peirce's valuable and brilliant work, Valsiner has further elaborated and brought to the foreground the operation of affective-semiotic processes, their role in creating Affective-Semiotic Fields, and how both may contribute to the configuration of psychological phenomena. By focusing upon the affective dimension of human psyche, and its formidable impact over semiotic processes, the author offers alternative ways for the investigation of Affectivity, a dimension of human development that has been relegated to a secondary role in the study of the human mind. Even today, the role of affect, feelings, and emotions is downplayed as the human mind is conceptualized as an information-processing machine or reduced to physiological, chemical operations from a neuroscientific approach (Gazzaniga et al., 2018). The following section, though, moves otherwise and will particularly address the ontogenesis of hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields and its major role in psychology. From my own perspective, the use of the construct constitutes a significant theoretical step forward to make sense of human's perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and everyday actions.

Affective-Semiotic Self-Regulatory Model

According to Valsiner's *Affective-Semiotic Regulatory Model* (Valsiner, 2014), human psyche operates as an organized fluid yet dynamically structured open system, composed by hierarchical layers of signs. At the bottom of the system lie those physiological processes that result in affective outcomes leading the system toward basic approach-avoidance, pleasure-pain experiences. The layers above, impregnated by affective semiosis, act upon the layers below as a kind of regulatory system, hierarchically organized as their respective Affective-Semiotic Fields progressively become more and more generalized, more and more powerful concerning the regulation of the psyche. Figure 1, inspired by Valsiner's Fig. 6.7—"Generalization of signs: how affect operates" (see Valsiner, 2014, p. 126)—provides a general picture of the such hierarchical systemic organization.

Level 4
Hypergeneralized
Affective-Semiotic
Fields

Level 3
Generalized
Emotion
Categories

Level 2
Specific
Emotion
Categories

Level 1
Immediate
Affective
Tone

Level 0
Physiological

I feel something...cannot describe it...but it is powerful....

VALUES, PREJUDICES

Deficient or eventual disappearance of verbal references

Attempts do describe complex feelings

Growing difficulty to verbally describe feelings

Anger
Joy
Disgust

Emergence of verbal references

Well-being
Malaise

General excitement

Differentiation of sensations

Excitement

Fig. 1 Affective-Semiotic Regulatory Model (after Valsiner, 2014)

According to the model, hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields are powerful enough to provide an all-encompassing filter, or frame for interpretation, concerning all individuals' interactions with themselves, others, and the world. Take, for example, someone deeply impregnated by a sense of religious devotion. Events, self-experiences, and social messages are perceived and interpreted according to her religious affective-semiotic framework, which serves to provide a hypergeneralized ground for her meaning-construction processes. When participating of communicative exchanges with a person holding different values and beliefs, she may have difficulties to listen to and understand the other's perspective, since her own values tend to constrain her capacity to even perceive or make sense of different yet possible meanings negotiated in the communication experience with others. The same happens to people with paranoid tendencies, rooted in hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields saturated with fear of being attacked by social others. Any word or gesture is immediately interpreted as a hostile movement, due to the overwhelming lenses generated by their hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields. In other words, such fields, better designated as *values* and *prejudices,* depending on the respective approach-avoidance valences, do exert a powerful regulatory role concerning human perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and actions (Branco, 2016).

Hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields and the Investigation of Dialogical Self Development

How do hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields develop along ontogenesis, and how do they relate to the development of the Dialogical Self? The Dialogical Self Theory proposed and further elaborated in the last three decades by Hubert Hermans and others (Hermans, 2001; Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Hermans et al., 2017) has served as a productive framework to make sense of the polyphonic and complex nature of the Self. It stresses the sociogenetic origin of the multiple, diverse I-Positionings that compose the Self, which can be conceived as an open system in permanent interactions with others throughout ontogeny. The Dialogical Self main characteristics consist of the occurrence of continuous dialogical interactions, simultaneously occurring at intra- and interpersonal levels, both contributing to its systemic configuration.

As the Dialogical Self develops in specific historical-cultural contexts in irreversible time, it establishes particular ties and relations with specific social others, which may generate the internalization of their voices, affects, and perspectives. However, internalization processes are constructive processes involving all dimensions of human psyche, and the notion that the significant others' voices are simply incorporated and reproduced by one's Self does not take into account the active role of individuals' agency. Moreover, from Valsiner's cultural semiotic perspective, the affective dimension of human interactions occupies a central role in internalization processes; therefore, instead of referring to "voices"—term directly associated with

verbal language—the active internalization of Affective-Semiotic Fields provides a much better picture of the processes involved.

From childhood to adolescence to adulthood, Affective-Semiotic Fields emerge, intensify, persist, transform, and fade away. As they emerge, they are hierarchically organized within the Dialogical Self System (Branco et al., 2020), and their hierarchical organization may change as time and contexts change alongside persons' life's trajectories. As they emerge, Affective-Semiotic Fields impregnate what we have denominated as *Dynamic Self Positionings (DSP)* (Branco et al., 2020), which correspond to what Hermans and colleagues designate as I-Positions (Hermans, 2001). With time and experience, certain Affective-Semiotic Fields become hypergeneralized and give rise to values and prejudices, which then guide the human psyche. Yet, hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields (values, prejudices) are dynamic, and even acknowledging that their relatively structured configuration is an important aspect of the Dialogical Self System—for it provides the system with a sense of oneness and continuity—these fields may reorganize themselves within the system, transform, intensify, or disappear along the person's developmental trajectory. In short, the way hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields emerge and operate in the irreversible time may help explain how psychological processes participate of the Dialogical Self development.

Data from a research carried out by our team in the Laboratory of Cultural Psychology, at the University of Brasilia, can illustrate the abovementioned point. We investigated, from a Trajectory Equifinality Approach (Sato et al., 2016), the development of the Dialogical Self of six obese women who, at some point of the study, were submitted to a bariatric surgery to lose weight. They were interviewed at three different moments—before, right after, and after months of the surgical procedure. As a result, we could follow some significant changes in their Dynamic Self Positionings, which indicated the quality and direction of their Dialogical Self development. Here I present the case of a woman who underwent a significant transformation due to this rupture (Zittoun, 2012)—the surgery—in her life's trajectory.

Regina (fictitious name) was 24 years old by the first interview. She was married, had a low-income work as a street-cleaner, weighed 179 kg, and had health problems due to her obesity. During the first interview, she explained she felt at ease with her weight because her father, then deceased, used to be a happy obese man, an extrovert person who loved to dance and did not care about other people's comments on his fat figure. She identified herself with him and did not care either, saying that she did not feel as a target of anyone's bullying. Her decision to undergo the bariatric surgery, according to her, resulted from realizing she could die, as her father did, due to health problems deriving from obesity. At this first interview, she said she was fine with her body, and the only reason to do the surgery was to take care of her health.

Regina's surgery, a few months later, was a success. By the third interview, she had lost an amazing total of 89 kg, and her narratives about herself significantly changed. In the interviews following the expressive weight loss, the picture changed completely. Progressively, in her narratives, she made explicit that, indeed, she suffered a lot with her relatives' bullying and was feeling more and

more proud about the way she saw herself in the mirror. A detailed analysis of her Dialogical Self development can be consulted in Branco and Oliveira (2019), where we explain how we inferred, from indicators extracted from her lengthy narratives, her Dynamic Self Positionings at each point and how this allowed us to organize a general hierarchical configuration of the Dialogical Self development of our participants during the period of the investigation. Here I will present the major change concerning Regina's trajectory during the year and a half that we investigated her self-reflections and appraisals about herself (Table 1). For the sake of space, only her dominant Dynamic Self Positioning among others, at each interview, is here included.

Regina's case provided interesting evidence of how, in a relatively short period of time during which a rupture (Zittoun, 2012) is experienced, the Dialogical Self can undergo a meaningful development. Her case, as well as other participants', additionally demonstrates the central role played by imagination of the future in people's self-development. Regina recurrently made explicit, especially at the third interview, that she would do everything she could to lose much more weight to become more beautiful in the future. Beauty, definitely, had become her most valued hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Field.

To conclude this chapter, it is worth mentioning that the role of imagined and anticipated futures has been another outstanding theoretical contribution of Jaan Valsiner to psychology, stressed in many of his publications (Valsiner, 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2019a, 2019b; Zittoun & Valsiner, 2016). His analysis of time and the conceptualization of the psychological dynamics between past, present, and future also consist of new, challenging venues for investigation of psychological phenomena. In short, Jaan Valsiner's work and legacy for theoretical psychology cannot be over overestimated. The scope of his contribution in opening new venues concerning theory and methodology, though, goes far beyond the innovative perspectives he proposes to make sense the complex and dynamic nature of values' development. In this chapter, my purpose was to particularly underline that the investigation of human developmental trajectories and experiences, with the use of dynamic and complex constructs as the one here presented (hypergeneralized Affective-Semiotic Fields), can certainly lead to welcome advances in the co-construction of new theoretical elaborations concerning the systemic and processual understanding of the human beings.

Table 1 The dominant Dynamic Self Positioning in Regina's Dialogical Self System at the three interviews

Prevalent Dynamic Self Positioning		
1st Interview	*2nd Interview*	*3rd Interview*
"I-as a daughter"	"I-as thin and healthy"	"I-as beautiful and very thin in the future"

References

Branco, A. U. (2016). Values and their ways of guiding the psyche. In J. Valsiner, G. Marsico, N. Chaudhary, T. Sato, & V. Dazzani (Eds.), *Psychology as the science of human being: The Yokohama Manifesto* (pp. 225–244). Springer.

Branco, A. U., & Valsiner, J. (2010). Towards psychology of affective processes: Semiotic regulation of dynamic fields. *Estudios de Psicología, 31*(3), 243–251.

Branco, A. U., & Oliveira, M. (2019). Dialogical self-development in obese women: a cultural psychology longitudinal study. *Avances en Psicología Latinoamericana, 37*(3) https://doi.org/10.12804/revistas.urosario.edu.co/apl/a.7989

Branco, A. U., Freire, S. F., & Roncancio-Moreno, M. (2020). Dialogical self system development: The co-construction of dynamic self positions along the life-course. In M. C. Lopes de Oliveira, A. U. Branco, & S. F. Freire (Eds.), *Psychology as a dialogical science: Self and culture mutual development* (pp. 53–72). Springer.

Bruner, J. (1993). *Acts of meaning: Four lectures on mind and culture*. Harvard University Press.

Galtung, J. (1990). Cultural violence. *Journal of Peace Research, 27*(3), 291–305.

Gazzaniga, M., Ivry, R. B., & Mangun, G. R. (2018). *Cognitive neuroscience: The biology of the mind* (5th ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.

Hermans, H. (2001). The dialogical self: Toward a theory of personal and cultural positioning. *Culture & Psychology, 7*(3), 243–281.

Hermans, H., & Gieser, T. (2012). *Handbook of dialogical self theory*. Cambridge.

Hermans, H., Konopka, A., Oosterwegel, A., & Zomer, P. (2017). Fields of tension in a boundary-crossing world: Towards a democratic organization of the self. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science, 51*, 505–535.

Lewin, K. (1965). *Teoria de campo em ciência social*. Pioneira.

Peirce, C. S. (1997). *Pragmatism as a principle and method of right thinking*. SUNY Press.

Roncancio-Moreno, M. (2015). Dinâmica das significações de si em crianças na perspectiva dialógico-cultural. [Children's self-meanings' dynamics from a cultural dialogical perspective]. Unpublished Doctoral dissertation, University of Brasília, Brazil.

Sato, T., Mori, N., & Valsiner, J. (2016). *Making of the future: The trajectory equifinality approach in cultural psychology*. Information Age Publishing.

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life. Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Valsiner, J. (1987). Culture and the development of children's action (2nd ed. in 1997). Wiley.

Valsiner, J. (1989). *Human development and culture: The social nature of personality and its study*. Lexington Books.

Valsiner, J. (1998). *The guided mind*. Harvard University Press.

Valsiner, J. (2001). Affective fields and their development. In J. Valsiner (Ed.), *Comparative study of human cultural development* (pp. 159–181). Fundación Infancia y Aprendizaje.

Valsiner, J. (2007). *Culture in minds and societies*. Sage.

Valsiner, J. (2012). *A guided science: History of psychology in the mirror of its making*. Transaction Publishers/Routledge.

Valsiner, J. (2014). *Invitation to cultural psychology*. Sage.

Valsiner, J. (2016). The human psyche on the border of irreversible time: Forward-oriented semiosis. *International Journal of Psychology, 51*, 304–305.

Valsiner, J. (2017a). *Between self and societies: Creating psychology in a new key*. Acta Universitatis Tallinnensis.

Valsiner, J. (2017b). *From methodology to methods in human psychology*. Springer.

Valsiner, J. (2019a). *Sensuality in human living: Cultural psychology of human affect*. Cambridge University Press.

Valsiner, J. (2019b). Cultural psychology as a theoretical project. *Estudios de Psicología*. https://doi.org/10.1080/02109395.2018.1560023

Valsiner, J., & Cairns, R. (1992). Theoretical perspectives on conflict and development. In C. V. Shantz & W. W. Hartup (Eds.), *Conflict in child and adolescent development* (pp. 15–35). Cambridge University Press.

Zittoun, T. (2012). Life course: A socio-cultural perspective. In J. Valsiner (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of culture and psychology* (pp. 513–535). Oxford University Press.

Zittoun, T., & Valsiner, J. (2016). Imagining the past and remembering the future: How the unreal defines the real. In T. Sato, N. Mori, & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *Making of the future: The trajectory equifinality approach in cultural psychology* (pp. 03–19). Information Age Publishing.