Developing Dynamic Methodologies: Jaan Valsiner's Influence on the Methodological Thinking in Cultural Psychology and Beyond

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1   Introduction

Those of us working in the discipline of psychology have become accustomed to the idea that as a discipline, psychology is continuously in crisis. That is, it is characterized by the lack of conceptual consensus about its foundational concepts and uses methodological approaches that are unable to provide the kind of knowledge needed to understand the fundamentals of human psyche. Vygotsky (2004) wrote about this state of crisis in psychology almost a 100 years ago, and since then, many others have pointed to this unfortunate state of affairs and suggested pathways out of the crisis (inter alia Danziger, 1990; Ellis & Stam, 2015; Flyvberg, 2001; Parker, 2014; Zagaria et al., 2020).

Since 1980s, Jaan Valsiner has been one of those scholars who has actively participated in the discussions about psychology's future, being a passionate advocate for a psychological science that has learned from its past and has a useful and dynamic agenda for the future. For decades, he has criticized the mainstream psychology for its lack of conceptual and methodological creativity and precision and pushed his fellow psychologists to think outside the mainstream, to use their imagination and find novel ways of pursuing research that asks interesting and original questions and seeks answers to these questions in innovative ways. Over the years, Valsiner has advanced a conceptual perspective of cultural psychology that offers the kind of metaparadigmatic alternative for the discipline that has the potential to lead psychology out of its perpetual state of crisis (Toomela, 2020; Valsiner, 2007, 2014a). And while the conceptual framework he has developed has been highly influential in cultural and developmental psychology and beyond, in this short chapter, I want to focus not on his conceptual influence per se but instead consider the

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impact this conceptual development has made on the methodological thinking within the discipline of cultural psychology and in psychology more broadly.

2 Moving Toward Dynamic Methodologies

It is impossible to consider Valsiner's impact on the methodological thinking separately from his conceptual advancement in cultural psychology. The two are fundamentally interlinked for, as Valsiner himself has repeatedly pointed out, cultural psychology's focus on complex human meaning systems requires new dynamic methodologies that are compatible with such a conceptual framework (Valsiner, 2014b). On the one hand, while searching these methodological approaches, Valsiner has always insisted on looking toward psychology's rich history. One of his ways of pushing the boundaries of methodological thinking in cultural psychology has been to shed light on the so-called forgotten methods that allow exploring the unfolding of meaning making. In his own words, such methods include:

> The introspection of the "Würzburg School" of early 20th century (Humphrey, 1951), the "Second Leipzig School's methods of *Aktualgenese* expanded into idiographic microgenesis (Abbey & Diriwächter, 2008; Diriwächter, 2009, 2012), Heinz Werner's focus on microgenesis (Wagoner, 2009), the thinking aloud methods from Otto Selz and Karl Duncker to contemporary cognitive science (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Simon, 2007), and Frederic Bartlett's method of repeated reproduction with its contemporary extension into conversational repeated reconstructions (Wagoner, 2007, 2009, 2012), and the use of microgenetic techniques in personality research (the "Lund school" of personality research of Ulf Kragh and Gudmund Smith). (Valsiner, 2014b, p. 21)

All of the methods mentioned here move away from looking solely at the outcomes of the developmental processes and instead aim to capture the change in meaning making as it unfolds. However, in one way or another, they are all directed at examining the meaning making after the event (i.e., these are reconstructive or *post-factum* methods) instead of allowing to explore meaning making that is about to happen in the future and meanings that are in the process of becoming (i.e., preconstructive or *pre-factum* methods) (Valsiner, 2014b). Cultural psychology with its conceptual focus on future-oriented processes is in dire need of the latter kind of methods, yet these have been somewhat more difficult to rediscover or create. I will return to this issue later in this chapter. Despite this continuing need for methodological innovation, Valsiner's impact on psychology's methodological thinking through rediscovering forgotten methods and providing an intellectual home and interdisciplinary meeting place for these on the pages of *Culture and Psychology* and in the many books dedicated to methodological innovation (inter alia Abbey & Surgan, 2012; Toomela & Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner et al., 2009) cannot be underestimated.

On the other hand, Valsiner's methodological work has not only been constrained to the rediscovery and promotion of several historical methods but instead has been characterized by the development of a methodological framework that enables

cultural psychologists to utilize and create methods in a manner that is meaningful within the specific boundaries of their own unique studies. His Methodology Cycle (Valsiner, 2014b, 2017) provides a powerful general methodological frame for cultural psychology as it guides researchers' decision-making and methodological moves throughout the research process from formulating the research question to interpreting and presenting the findings. In mainstream psychology, methodology is usually understood as a recipe of how to conduct research studies. In such an approach, methods become ready-made tools collated together in a toolbox out of which the researcher can pick and choose the ones that fit with his or her study aims, current scientific fashions, or ideas about value and validity of science (Toomela, 2009). If you want to gather in-depth data about the phenomenon, choose interviews; if it is the prevalence of the phenomenon in a population that you want to understand, then survey design is the one you should be looking at; if you are interested in exploring causal relations between variables, conduct an experiment. In developing his Methodology Cycle, Valsiner moves in the opposite direction. The aim of the Methodology Cycle is to reconnect researchers, who are engaged in empirical work, to the theoretical and philosophical issues that underpin their studies. Here, methodology becomes the study of theoretical explanation or justification as to why the researchers think that their chosen methods allow answering the research questions they have formulated (Toomela, 2020). In other words, methods, in this approach, are interdependent with the general methodology. We should not look at methods in isolation but instead consider them in relation to other aspects of a research study: basic assumptions about the world, our understanding of the phenomena, our theoretical concepts, and the data collected. The relations between different elements of the cycle, namely, the relations between basic assumptions and phenomena, theory and methods construction, phenomena and methods construction, and methods and data, need to thus be carefully considered, and decisions about best ways of resolving the tensions in these relations need to be reached. Within the Methodology Cycle, some moves and decisions about methods make sense as the methods are placed in reasonable and meaningful relations with other aspects of the cycle while other moves do not and should thus be avoided (Valsiner, 2014b, 2017). It is in this sense that the methods of cultural psychology are always constructed and "each research question – based on theoretical and phenomenological considerations – leads to the construction of its own methods" (Valsiner, 2017, p. 1).

The researcher, the one who makes these methodological moves and creates productive solutions to tensions within relations, is therefore at the center of Valsiner's Methodology Cycle. Researchers in qualitative research are typically required to be self-reflective to turn the gaze that they are used to turning toward the experiences of their study participants, toward themselves, in order to become aware of their own ideas, reasons, motivations, and reactions (Berger, 2015). For Valsiner, this kind of reflection is necessary but not sufficient for solving the kinds of tensions and dilemmas that researcher encounters in the Methodology Cycle. In order to solve these, the researcher needs more than reflection – he needs intuition. He needs to combine in his way of approaching research two worlds that are ordinarily kept

apart – the world of science and the world of art: "The ways of the artist and those of the scientist meet in the middle of [the Methodology Cycle]. Both rely on the intuition – be it educated in the scientific lores or artistic in grasping the crucial features of human existence" (Valsiner, 2014b, p. 16) for it is only the researcher who has intuition that can feel his way into a phenomenon and at the same time use this intuition to create a way out of the methodological struggles he or she faces.

And so it is that Valsiner's contribution to methodological thinking in cultural psychology is inseparable from his conceptual advancement in this field of inquiry. While his advocacy for the historical methods in psychology is highly valuable and has brought back to psychology many productive and original lines of inquiry, in my view, his influence in cultural psychology and beyond is imperative precisely because he has not limited himself to developing specific methods. Instead, he has established a methodological framework that demands the researchers to approach their entire research enterprise in an analytical and conceptual manner and through that enables them to avoid some of the mistakes that have trapped psychology in the state of crisis for so many years.

3   Working Within the Methodology Cycle

Valsiner's conceptual framework, including his ideas about Methodology Cycle, have been deeply influential for my own work. As someone who was initially trained in the mainstream ways of doing psychology, I have had my fair share of struggles when working within the Methodology Cycle. In the remainder of this chapter, I will reflect on some of these struggles, building on examples from different studies that I have conducted over the years.

My first set of struggles is related to underlying assumptions – phenomena – theory relations. Working within the Methodology Cycle has pushed me to really focus on the phenomenon and to interrogate my understandings, including the common sense understandings about the phenomenon. It has meant thinking through the underlying assumptions that I use to see the world and understanding how the phenomena appear to me through the lens of those assumptions. It has also forced me to unravel my understandings about the phenomena from those related to theory in order to avoid jumping too quickly into using unhelpful and misguided theoretical concepts. The central concern of my research over the years has been to understand identity development in the lifecourse. Working within the Methodology Cycle, I have had to discipline myself to avoid theoretical foreclosures that are offered by the many theories and models within identity research and developmental psychology and reach for the phenomenological understanding when examining the processes related to identity development. What does it mean to identify with someone or something? What do people actually do when they construct identities? These questions have led me to theoretical elaborations that I have summarized in a semiotic cultural approach to identity development (Märtsin, 2019), elaborations that have been enabled by the process of solving tensions within the Methodology Cycle.

My second set of struggles has to do with the phenomena – theory – methods relations. When choosing my methods, I have had to work hard to move away from the tendency to consider the things that are doable – the methods in the toolbox that have been used before and that I could also use – and instead consider things that are actually needed in my studies. I have often felt that the two approaches don't match and have found myself knowing conceptually what is needed but being unable to create or invent the kinds of methods that I need. Nevertheless, considering the relations within Methodology Cycle has helped me, in my own view, to move in the right direction. The focus of my work has been in understanding the identity development processes, and I have built on the logic that these processes become available for examination in situations, where the persons' planned and goal-directed everyday conduct becomes interrupted and new ways of relating to self, others, and the world need to be constructed in order to continue the movement toward future life goals (Märtsin, 2019). Thus, my phenomenological and theoretical ideas have guided me toward focusing on ruptures and the following transition periods and the meaning construction that emerges during these periods. They have directed me away from the sole consideration of developmental outcomes and toward exploring the intermediate stages and forms in the process of development. In other words, they have directed me toward examining the possible trajectories that are opened up in the multifurcation points that ruptures create and that could potentially actualize but for some reason get abandoned in the process of development. In my study of young adults on the move (Märtsin, 2010), these considerations led me to a three-layered approach in trying to capture the interim meanings and emotional reactions of my study participants at different timescales: in-depth interviews conducted three times during a one-year period to capture broad themes and changes, once a month diary-type questionnaires to capture more detailed accounts of participants' experiences, and sentence-completion exercises within these monthly questionnaires to understand the micro fluctuations in their emotional states (see also Märtsin, 2012). The combination of these three layers of meaning making enabled me to reconstruct the ruptures and transitions after they had happened at times with quite significant detail. And even if they allowed me to consider meaning making after it had already occurred and not as it was unfolding toward the future, I was still able to examine the process, not solely the outcomes of the identity development.

Similar conceptual concerns about studying processes of meaning making guided also my study of women's identity development during their transition back to work after becoming mothers. In this case, these considerations led me to include arts-based methods into my data collection activities. I asked the women to create a collage that would represent them as a woman in the present moment of their development, with the help of a women's magazine and a range of arts and craft materials. I asked them to talk me through the process of their collage-making during and after the artwork was made. The method gave me many interesting and useful entrances into women's meaning making, opened up ways of exploring themes that might be hard to verbalize in a traditional interview, and importantly allowed me to explore the meanings that were represented on the paper as they were emerging.

The collage-making thus enabled me to move away from static representations of women's experiences and toward more dynamic and open narratives that are in line with my phenomenological and conceptual understanding of the identity development processes (see also Märtsin, 2018).

Finally, the third set of struggles within the Methodology Cycle that I want to mention here are related to the acknowledgment that research is not a static and linear process, where you answer certain questions and make certain decisions at crucial points in the journey and then march forward with the rationale you have created. Working within the Methodology Cycle has led me to recognize that in any research, one needs to continuously move between the different elements of the study, consider their relations, and notice and resolve the tensions that emerge within those relations. Psychological research conducted in this way thus becomes dynamic in nature with researchers needing to innovate as they go without knowing whether that innovation is going to give them the results they are looking for. And this, for me, is where the importance of researcher's intuition lies, namely, in the strength and courage to try things that have never been done before but that make sense and might work. It lies in the ability to use the uncertainty to one's own advantage and imagine possible pathways into the future toward a specific outcome that may not but might lead to desired results. And in my view, it is this kind of attitude that leads to the creation of dynamic and always evolving methodological approaches that are needed in cultural psychology and in psychology more broadly.

4   Where to From Here?

In this short chapter, I have sought to describe two ways Jaan Valsiner contributed to the advancement of methodological thinking in both cultural psychology specifically and in the discipline of psychology generally. Those who know Valsiner's work are familiar with its peculiar feature, namely, the lack of empirical studies that would provide the specific real-world connection and context for his theoretical theses. On the one hand, this is not surprising. For Valsiner (2014b), data is needed only at crucial bifurcation points in theory development, while the accumulation of data simply for demonstrating aspects of people's experiences that do not lead to any significant theoretical breakthroughs, but repeat in various forms the things we already know, is nonsensical and should be avoided. In light of this view, his choice of not conducting any empirical studies makes a lot of sense. On the other hand, though, while moving decisively away from conducting his own empirical studies, Valsiner continues to be critical of the methodological improvements in psychology, including cultural psychology. In particular, he has repeatedly pointed out the lack of innovative *pre-factum* methods in cultural psychology that are needed to examine the meaning making as it is emerging in the movement toward imagined future. Over the years, Valsiner has done important conceptual and methodological groundwork for the development of such methods. And so it is my hope that the current and coming generations of cultural psychologists will have the courage, creativity, and

intuition to build on this work and take the leap toward new ways of doing psychology that will lead the discipline out of its perpetual crisis.

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