From "I-AM" to "WE-AM" Predicates: Considering Self-Reflexivity Through a Collective "I"

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It is an absolute honor to reflect on the theoretical contributions of Jaan Valsiner. In his illustrious career, Jaan has published a staggering amount of new methodological and theoretical advancements in the field of psychology. His list of publications, books, awards, and professorships is so long that it is only dwarfed by the frequent flyer miles he has accumulated, exhibiting a scholar whose work is truly interdisciplinary, intercultural, and international in scope. In his quest to rediscover the space for an individual-focused psychology, Valsiner has secured himself as the preeminent individual for the foreseeable future.

In this chapter, I reflect on one of his famous open systems – the self-reflexivity of the I-AM cycle (Valsiner, 2014a). This model exhibits the fundamental building blocks of meaning-making: stem concepts. In reviewing the cycle, I first show how it exhibits both my own understandings of the tenets of a cultural psychological framework but also the three tenets of a general psychology (Valsiner, 2020b). I provide a few expansions and points of interest, including additional stems and the methodological use of stem-based analysis. Afterward, I take the model of I-AM – of an individual generating his or her personal, singular identity – and consider what it means for a collective group (WE) to generate a singular individual's identity (AM). I show how we can use the I-AM self-reflexivity loop to expand our understanding of presented identities toward identities generated by groups (WE-AM).

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1   The I-AM Cycle

The I-AM cycle is a cultural psychological model of how individuals arrive at any self-statement in order to develop their own personal identity (see Fig. 1). The self ("I") engages in a continued self-reflection of itself at each moment, eventually building toward an understanding of oneself ("I-AM…that reflection in the mirror"). Once the "I-AM" becomes established, the individual is able to begin attaching predicates onto itself – it becomes specified. The cyclical movement of "I-AM" to "I-AM" is not a repetition but instead a dialogue of the self-in-being (Valsiner & Cabell, 2011) that sets the stage for higher-level coalitions of new self-positions (Bento, 2013). This "I-AM" is considered a building block of meaning-making – a "stem concept" (Valsiner, 2014a) that is the smallest possible unit of meaningful meaning.

Future Orientation, Open Systems, Individualization

This model encapsulates what I consider to be the primary theoretical foundations of a cultural psychological framework: *future oriented, open systems, and individualization*. The self's constant self-reflection is tied directly to the irreversibility of time, where the historical influences may direct, but do not require, the continued future-forward actions of individuals. The construction of one's identity in a passing moment precludes the future construction and promotes some paths while suppressing others, but yet the soon-to-be-created self is entirely unique in its emergence due to the movement of time. While it may appear that generalization of psychology is
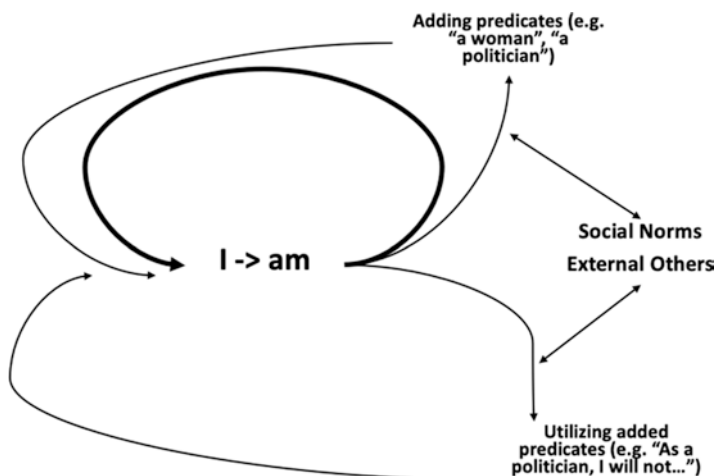

Fig. 1   The I-AM cycle. (Adapted from Valsiner, 2014a, Fig. 1.8)

crippled by such truths, such matters can be easily solved by including time within the model of psychological development.

The system provides the attachment of an infinite number of predicates, highlighting the importance of our models to be open and consider a wide range of both outputs as well as unexpected inputs. The individual may begin by saying, "I-AM…a man," but may transition through their life to come toward the new building output of "I-AM…a woman." This is in comparison to closed systems, where mainstream psychological research has typically been situated, where researchers may argue over whether or not X is a moderator or mediator of Y, or the impact of X onto a given Y, but rarely consider the possibility for change in Y becoming Z due to some catalytic event (Cabell & Valsiner, 2014).

Valsiner's value of open-system methodology has been a constant presence in his writings, from early in his career (Valsiner, 1984) to the current day (Valsiner, 2020a). In each writing, the focus of an open-system methodology has always been to model the continual processes of construction of the everyday life. In open-system modeling, we aim not to create a summation of an average individual, whose average characteristics have an average impact of a certain effect size onto another reified construction of some other use of measurement. Instead, open-system modeling axiomatically takes at its core that observations of features – personality, intelligence, and even meaning itself – are characterized by variability that is interdependent on both the environmental constraints and individual agency.

The individual agency of a person in promoting variation in the system provides the critical need to turn psychology toward the focus on the individual psyche, that is, that psychology can be best understood as focused on the individual, and generalizations can best be made from a single case (Valsiner, 1986). We can look toward individual's own meaning-making processes to observe general knowledge of psychology in the wild. This bold axiom is one of the defining features of Valsiner's semiotic cultural psychology – that psychology is of the individual, not individuals. In his classic textbook on cultural psychology, Valsiner even defines a collective culture – typically understood as "the group" – as the process by which one "make personal culture publicly visible, as every aspect of personal reconstruction of one's immediate life-world reflects that externalization" (Valsiner, 2000, p. 57). That is to say, collective culture exists as the individual's externalization of their own personal culture and how they as individuals interpret the world.

Here, the I-AM cycle directs us to consider that psychology is not a group-based activity but are made of individuals, are created by individuals, and are deconstructed through individual choice and action. The individual may place themselves in a group ("I-AM…a citizen of this country"), but external influences only can direct our meaning-making toward or away from such constructions ("Though the government will not give me the passport I seek to confirm this fact"). Valsiner is unwavering in his defense of ensuring that psychology is centered on the individual person. There are many foundationally strong theoretical reasons why this line of thought is necessary, and such discussion is out of the range of this manuscript (c.f. Cornejo, 2020, for a theoretical overview of Valsiner's approach).

Recently, Valsiner (2020b) outlined three universal principles of the human psyche and their relation to cultural psychology: *normativity, liminality,* and *resistance* (Wagoner & Carriere, 2020). The human psyche is individual but must negotiate itself in the place of social norms that must constantly be confronted. In doing so, the individual rests constantly in a between space – a liminal space between future and past, goals and achievements, outside and inside. In the directionality toward new liminalities, new futures, and new meanings, we find ourselves faced with resistances – of paths not chosen and of paths not yet reachable. In self-reflexivity, we can see the presence of all three.

Normativity

Stem concepts such as I-AM have not been heavily expanded upon in the field. Further expansions of the I-AM cycle have been primary in considering other stem concepts of human cultural self-organization (Valsiner, 2014a), including the "I-WILL," "I-NEED," and "I-WANT." In graphing out the various examples of how each of these concepts works differently, Valsiner shows how the interaction of the stem concepts ends with the emergence of a circumvention strategy (Josephs et al., 1999; Josephs & Valsiner, 1998), where affectively laden ideas (will, need, want, am) are managed in the stream of consciousness. The combination of each of these stem concepts in unique patterns, orders, and mannerisms provides the individual a complex structure of meanings to create and dismantle social norms, by either prohibiting or enforcing a given social action. Therefore, the normativity of meaning-making lies within the functioning and use of semiotic stems.

Liminality

The stem concept I-NEED focuses on the individual being oriented toward an object that is not currently present. It is the individual's first chance to consider the move from present to future – a future with such a need fulfilled. Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides us with a clear indication of such a model, with the individual placed in a given "level" yet the need itself not sufficient for its achievement. The I-WANT concept is conceptually similar to the I-NEED predicate, with its difference being in a lack of action in its movement – it simply identifies the liminal point ("I want X"<>"I do not have X"). The stem concepts exhibit the presence of liminality – that the meaning-making of the individual constantly occurs at the border between one state and another.

Resistance

Finally, the functionality of circumvention strategies also exhibits the universal principle of *resistance* since their use is primarily that of distancing (directing) ourselves toward a new meaning. The building of stem concepts continually brings us to these various levels of liminality and betweenness.

> Regulators of the relationship between meaning complexes are what we call circumvention strategies; these are semiotic organizers of dialogic (and autodialogic) relations between meaning complexes. They change the "outcome" of the persons' reasoning…regardless of whether the established meaning itself changes. (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998, p. 71)

Stem concepts are indicative of a generalized intentionality – they signal toward actions we may take or constructions we want to have. These stem concepts can help us identify semiotic mechanisms – indicators of regulative processes. These semiotic mechanisms build our semiotic hierarchies, which provides us with the ability to view the dynamics of our sign negotiation. For example, Fig. 2 shows us the basic construction and interaction of these concepts in action. The individual wants to dance but is faced with being in a holy place, such as a church. There, the mechanism of holy brings various meanings that downregulate the concept away from a given action. In the final step, the semiotic hierarchy emerges when a circumvention strategy is used to justify the dancing since they "don't care" about the meaning of "holy."

Circumvention strategies create the resistance needed to move past semiotic blocks (e.g., "holy place") – to destroy or recreate a new semiotic hierarchy ("I don't care"). This act of resistance – creating a new space to circumvent the semiotic block – can be traced through the self-reflexivity loop.

2   Methodological Power of Stem Concepts

While Valsiner notes these "four basic stem concepts," it is not explicitly stated whether or not these are the *only* stem concepts that exist in human cultural self-organization. For example, the I-WISH concept is also focused on the move from the present toward the future. Yet unlike I-NEED or I-WANT, I-WISH rejects the

Fig. 2 Semiotic hierarchy of stem concepts

desire for action, leaving such actions out of the hands of the individual and into the hands of spirituality, deities, and chance.

It provides the landscape for pure imaginative acts of worlds *as-if* (Veale & Andres, 2014). There is also the past-tense uses of such stems, such as the I-WAS stem, looking back to one's prior self in time and using it as a constructive bridge toward the constant future I-AMs. There are countless others that could potentially be offered as further stem concepts, including I-IMAGINE, I-BELIEVE, I-MUST, and I-KNOW, as a few examples. Likewise, we must recognize the infinite number of other stems that could emerge due to tense changes, adverbs, negations, and other additional grammatical movements that build various degrees of the stem concepts ("I sort of need").

Yet the value in these stems is not in their multiplicity – but in their root organization of the individual psyche – *basic* being the operating word in his notation of "four *basic* stem concepts" (Valsiner, 2014a, pp. 21, emphasis added). The continued concern of the future of a cultural psychology has never been its theoretical arguments – but in its methodological advancements. This has been a constant concern for Valsiner, writing and editing books (Toomela & Valsiner, 2010; Valsiner, 2017, 2020a) and articles (Branco & Valsiner, 1997; Crawford & Valsiner, 2002; Valsiner, 2014b, 2014c) on the issue. The stem concepts help break down the individual psyche toward its most basic rationale, which then can be mapped out to understand the movement of meaning construction over time.

In this way, we use stem concepts as a way to help identify the mechanisms which build out semiotic hierarchies (Valsiner, 2001, 2014a, Fig. 6.1). In doing so, the stems point us to search for actions people would and would not do and discover *why*. The stems are what Vygotsky would call the "minimal gestalt":

> Psychology, as it desires to study complex wholes … needs to change the methods of analysis into elements by the analytic method that reveals the parts of the unit [literally: breaks the whole into linked units—*metod … analiza*, … razchleniayushego *na edinitsy*]. It has to find the further undividable, surviving features that are characteristic of the given whole as a unity—units within which in mutually opposing ways these features are represented [Russian: *edinitsy, v kotorykh* v protivopolozhnom vide *predstavleny eti svoistva*]. (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 16, as quoted in Diriwächter & Valsiner, 2006)

While such methodological examinations of stem concepts is limited, there has been some work done in this direction in terms of *modal articulation* (De Luca Picione et al., 2018, 2019; De Luca Picione & Freda, 2016) or in an analysis of semiotic processing (Carriere, 2013). Many calls for methods that can bring these stem concepts to light have been proposed by Valsiner, including focusing on an individual-socioecological reference frame (Valsiner, 2014b), of single-episode analysis (Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010), and of transforming Likert scales (Wagoner & Valsiner, 2005).

3   I-AM: Not So Individually Constructed?

In the past section, I reviewed the limited amount of work that discusses Valsiner's conceptualization of stem concepts and explored a few ways that these concepts already have room for expansion – by examining other potential stem concepts beyond the presented four and the methodological room provided by breaking down the individual into its most basic units that keep within it its functional unity. In providing this review, I noted how such a concept encapsulates not only personally relevant cultural psychological tenets but even larger principles of a general psychology as espoused by Valsiner himself. The creation of an individual's identity – how they perceive and construct their own existence – is the core of cultural psychological phenomenon.

Yet how are we truly aware of the identity of others? We trust that such constructions are individually driven (while limited by social norms) and individually decided. However, we can consider individuals whose identities are publicly constructed by a wide range of actors and whose identity is not chosen by the individual themselves. A politician hires a staff of speech writers who meticulously craft the speech they'll give in public. The public relations team prepares a given statement that "speaks" for the company. A valedictorian's speech is cleared by administrators and other adults before being read to their peers. We may err and misinterpret psychological phenomenon if we were to make conclusions about the individual's I-AM cycle without having a much deeper look at the group's influence on the presented identity – and consider much more seriously the implications of a WE in constructing the presented I.

4   Finding the Collective Self in Cultural Psychology

In the United States, there are 535 elected members of Congress and over 13,000 unelected staff members, with an average of 34 unelected persons to each elected person. These unelected individuals share no spotlight, receive no recognition, and get no accolades. But they are the ones who craft the policy, who write the speeches, and who rehearse the talking points and debate answers. They are the ones answering the phones, replying to emails, and meeting with stakeholders. All for the "Office of Politician Y."

Yet it is not the staff who go on talk shows, speaks at political rallies, or give statements in front of their peers in their legislature. It is the politician's words, the politician's policies – regardless of the true "identity" behind the work. In the case of this politician, whose identity do we – the external individual – see? When Emmanuel Macron addresses the French people and claims "I love France," whose identity is speaking? Is it President Macron? Is it the speech writer who wrote the words? Is it the Chief of Staff who clears the speech and forward it to Macron?

There are a few potential spaces where theoretical notions of the collective voice may already exist: in literature and in dialogical self. In what follows, I provide basic overviews of both theories and how they consider the collective self, concluding neither truly addresses the issue of a self presented by others.

Dialogical Notions of Collective Selves

The notion of collective voices has been long espoused by proponents of *Dialogical Self Theory* (DST). In this way, *collective voices* are focused on the cultural milieu that may constrain or free an individual's dialogicality. In one of its seminal papers, Hermans elaborates that the collective voice is the overarching normativity that guides behavior, stating, "Cultures can be seen as *collective voices* that function as social positions in the self" (2001, p. 272, emphasis added). This has been focused beyond cultures and toward any general group interaction. The collective voice as "me-as-researcher" includes myself in the larger group of all researchers, such that my *voice* in that moment may be constrained by the mannerisms, syntaxes, and rules that should be prescribed to all researchers. This larger meaning toward identifying oneself within a position of "for the group" or "under the guise of a group membership" has been primarily examined under conditions when the speakers use "we." This could be "we-as-workers" (Kuusela et al., 2020), we-as-group (Ritella & Ligorio, 2016), or even "I-as-psychologist" (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007).

But this understanding of the collective self does not truly identify the phenomenon under examination. A political speech – while given by one individual – may be directed at a larger group (We-As-Patriots) or focus the candidate into a given social grouping (I-As-Like You). But in each, there is a secondary collective – a collective that becomes a singular construction of "The Politician" – spoken by an individual, unknown to the rest of the individuals of their multitude.

Instead, we may be better served to turn toward some recent cultural psychology of music work on homophony – a multiplicity of voices that sound as one since they have very similar trajectories (Klempe, 2018). This work comes from Bakhtin's (1984) treatise on polyphony, where the social situation is exhibiting a multitude of voices interchangeably at the same time. While the idea of implicit polyphony can help expand Dialogical Self Theory (c.f. Valsiner, 2019, p. 441), it does little to target the reduction – not expansion – of voices under investigation.

Literature as Collective Self

Literature has a storied past of being interpreted through a psychological lens – with journals such as *Psychology and Literature*, numerous publications in *Culture and Psychology* (Lehmann & Brinkmann, 2020; Moghaddam, 2004; Pérez & Reisenzein, 2020), and a Niels Bohr Lecture series dedicated to analyzing the diaries of the

Mass Observation Archive (Wagoner et al., 2015). In these approaches, researchers apply psychological concepts to famous pieces of literature, making claims on what the authors intended. This places psychology in a "privileged position" as Moghaddam (2004) would say. In the same moment we are reading a text, we are making claims about the truth that the writers meant to say, without having any access or empirical evidence to substantiate these claims.

In these works, there is little separation done between the characters and the authors – their existence is fundamentally linked to the author, who imbues their own cultural meanings, understandings, and theories of human behavior into their characters through the written word. The author creates the world of the character – building their backstory, framing their goals and intentions, and shaping their actions. Yet in analyzing speeches, we diverge. There is a singular voice, and we remain in the realm of analyzing characters, failing to consider the authors behind the work. The characters, albeit real with a human body and their own psyche, pre-form a scripted speech, while pundits argue over the presidential tones, the proper attire worn, and the tone set by the oration. The fictionalization of backstories is encompassed in company mission statements or in politicians' claims about their own upbringing and storied past.

While psychological research using literature has successfully understood the importance of the author within the text, there has not been a concerted effort to apply this type of thinking further. Yet there still remains important distinctions – the character is restricted directly to the author, while the figurehead still has room to deviate from the script. Moreover, it is much easier to identify the author of a book, compared to the author of a speech.

5 What Can Be Gained from WE-AM?

In the past section, I attempted to find other work in cultural psychology that may help explain the construction of a public-facing identity. No current theoretical discussions could reasonably explain the phenomenon at hand. Such a review must be met with the critical question of whether or not such a construction is even theoretically meaningful – that something must be gained (or lost) by its (ex)inclusion.

The theoretical advancement of the WE-AM cycle relies in moving the presence of the social others from outside of the I-AM cycle to within cycle and considering not just "external" others but the "internal" others who are creating the presented self (see Fig. 3). Instead of considering the social norms on the outside of the process, it becomes even more central to the individual's construction as multiple selves are present in the moment to decide which predicates will be added, utilized, and destroyed in each moment.

The addition of "We" – WE-AM, WE-WANT, WE-WILL, WE-NEED – stem concepts provides us with a new type of identity, that of a constructed "we." Still individual in nature (thus, the "am", not "are") – the presence of the "we" notates that the true identity of the individual is not completely of their own – its agency and
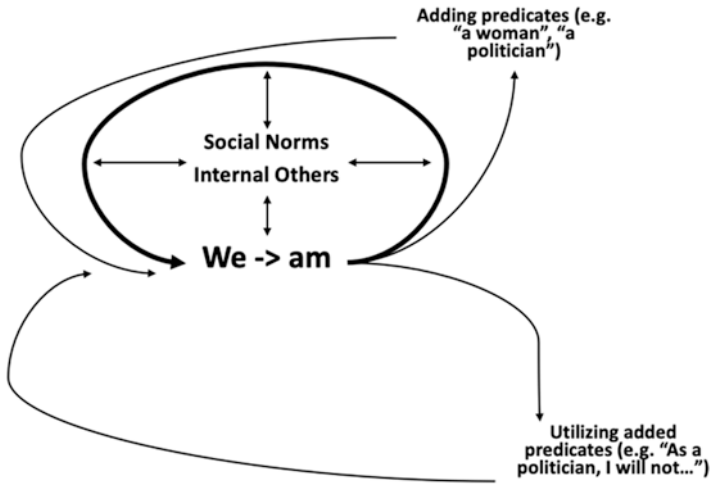
Fig. 3 The WE-AM cycle

construction have become fuzzy. The individual can only be seen in the moment when their divergence from the WE-AM cycle is made clear – such as when going off a provided script. Otherwise, the WE-AM cycle is maintained through the internal norms of what the staff *wants*, what the staff *needs*, what the staff wants the self to *be*.

Considering the expansion of I-AM toward WE-AM provides additional considerations of the voices within a given voice – in a sense, individualizing group-based voices. In examining the positioning of nation states, Mogghadam and Kavulich (2007) discuss the negotiations of rights and duties at an international level between Iran, the United States, and the United Nations. This work could be expanded to examine not only what the government says at press release level but also beyond that, examining the lead actors' own motivations, desires, wants, and needs.

A WE-AM cycle also provides the space to expand considerations of a single voice into multiple voices. Research that examines the speeches, tweets, or statements of various "figureheads" should at least be critical of itself on whether or not one is truly examining the thoughts and beliefs of any given individual but rather examining a presented pseudo-self that speaks less to the individual but toward the individual as the group wishes them to be presented (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019; Shane, 2018).

6   Conclusion

To truly cover the importance of Valsiner's work in cultural psychology is beyond the scope of this article – and most likely, beyond the scope of this book itself. Yet what we can see in looking at his work is an unwavering commitment to developing,

step-by-step, a theoretical and methodological guide to examining the individual psyche. In this short commentary, I reflected on a fragment of Valsiner's ideas – that of self-reflexivity and the I-AM cycle – and discussed how even this small figure presents an encapsulation of his theoretical ideas. I also noted the methodological benefits of the I-AM cycle in providing stem concepts and advanced a few further elaborations that could emerge from continued work on this idea. Finally, I considered how it may be expanded if we consider a socially constructed self (figureheads) and provided some considerations for future research.

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