

Chapter 12

Psychology's Purgatory: Situating the Theoretical Construction of Agency

Jaan Valsiner

Let us begin from the basic axiom—the *notion of God* (or any version of deities in any societies) *is not a theoretical concept* in scientific psychology. It can be a very important semiotic sign complex to organize human lives (and deaths) of millions of people worldwide, it may be a commonsense notion for which many people want, or agree, to die. Despite all of its social and psychological importance, that notion is not a concept with which psychological theories can operate. It is a notion that needs to be explained itself—from the perspective of psychological theories.

12.1 Religious Phenomena are Crucial for Scientific Psychology

All phenomena of religious kind—and there is a mindboggling multitude of those all around the world—are relevant phenomena for psychological theories to address. The ease of creating individual deities as helpers in psychotherapy process (Valsiner 1999) or Alice Lakwena's creative adjustment of the Christian imperative "you shall not kill!" to the ways of warfare of the Lord's Resistance Army (Behrend 1999) are extremes of the examples how the complex semiotic-mediating devices we indiscriminately call "religions" matter in the living and dying of real human beings. Both destruction and construction are accomplished through the help of religious systems ranging from crusades and iconoclasm to personal retribution efforts (Obeyesekere 1975). Children are brought up with a focus on expecting some religious figures to perform miracles (Josephs and Valsiner 1999; Watzlawik and Valsiner 2012).

When seen from the perspective of cultural psychology, all religious systems in the World emphasize one or another kind of *transcendentality persuasion* upon

J. Valsiner (✉)

Niels Bohr Professor of Cultural Psychology, Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, Aalborg, Denmark
e-mail: jvalsiner@gmail.com

the upcoming generations. Human beings are persuaded that *they themselves* need to have the will to believe in agency that is located beyond the borders of their immediate accessibility. When a young child is told a “miracle story”—about Jesus walking on the water—the immediate contrast with the child’s own inability to do so is obvious. Yet, the generalization suggested from that contrast links the unable (the child) with the able (Jesus) through the suggestion “if *you believe enough* you could be like Jesus.” The self-motivating intra-psychological goal directedness is set up—the child who accepts the semiotic trap may start on the path on believing more and more—trying to reach the status of “enough” so that she or he could replace the mechanical water-skiing by spiritually based walking on the water. The latter moment never comes—yet many other psychological changes happen in this process of trying to reach the horizon.

What is at stake here is the infinity of the agentic role of human beings—the imperative of “you should believe more” and “even more” and “even more”—and so to infinity (or a stop in that process—at death or conversion to atheism, yet another infinite belief system). Psychology needs to create a theoretical understanding of such infinite belief systems that reach a high level of extension in time—as shown by history of all religions—and generalizing abstraction. The religious domain is the best arena for study of processes of hyper-generalization of signs (Beckstead et al. 2009; Valsiner 2014). This process leads to psychological phenomena of complete “takeover” of the human minds (and hearts), and is thus the ultimate empirical research object for general psychology.

12.2 Going Beyond William James

It is James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1902) that is usually cited if a psychologist wants to present oneself as a sophisticated researcher in the arena of complexities of religions. The focus on *experience*—personal feeling-in into the world—was crucial for James. Interestingly, psychology of religion had, from the 1920s onwards, become a hostage to empirical comparisons of religious groups of various kinds, as to their average results on different psychological “measures.” What had become lost in the process of turning psychology of religion into a field of “empirical research” was precisely the focus on *experience*—the issue that both of the contributors to this section of our book (Browning Hesel; Chap. 10, this volume; Childs; Chap. 11, this volume) emphasize. This restoration of the focus on experience needs to be situated in the context of the reemergence of psychology of religion—now in the wider framework of cultural psychology (Belzen 2010). The coverage of religious experiences is crucial for turning psychology into a comprehensive science where the war; between the natural sciences and *Geisteswissenschaften* can be broken. Not including religious experiences—together with other hyper-generalized values (Branco and Valsiner 2012)—would be an obstacle for psychology as science. The latter is still to be reached, since William James’

depiction of the state of the art (science) of psychology given in the year 1892 can still be true today:

Psychology ... is to-day hardly more than physics was before Galileo, what chemistry was before Lavoisier. It is a mass of phenomenal description, gossip, and myth, including, however, real material enough to justify one in the hope that with judgment and good will on the part of those interested, its study may be so organized even now so as to become worthy of the name of natural science at no very distant day. (James 1892, p. 146)

Of course, psychology has progressed over the past century—yet in a direction that, replacing “a mass of phenomenal description, gossip, and myth” in James’ quote by “a mass of *p*-values, pseudo-empirical theories, and unsupported claims of public usefulness” the delayed development of the area into a natural science is still obvious. Psychology has largely imitated natural sciences, rather than become one itself. In the natural sciences, it is the nature of the object phenomena that is honored—even if studied from various angles of approach that diminish the full richness of the phenomena. In psychology, phenomena are often “measured out of existence” by attributing numbers to them, using large samples rather than in-depth study of individuals. The phenomena of religious experiences have been left out of consideration for decades. Such experiences are central to human beings—as *Homo sapiens* operates at the highest level of reflexive self-organization far beyond the basic brain processes that fascinate our contemporary neuroscientists. Scientific study of these higher psychological functions is the task for cultural psychology—an up-and-coming discipline.

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