

# Chapter 2

## Subjectivity as a New Theoretical, Epistemological, and Methodological Pathway Within Cultural-Historical Psychology



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**Abstract** The chapter presents the articulation between theory, epistemology, and methodology as an important requirement for advancing a proposal of subjectivity from a cultural–historical perspective. Historically, psychological theories have not been used to discuss explicitly the epistemological consequences of their theoretical advances. As a consequence, methodology frequently appears as an abstract and isolated field, oriented toward providing devices for empirical research in different fields, and one which is based on different theoretical perspectives. It is not possible to study subjectivity, as defined within this perspective, directly from empirical data. The concepts assembled in this theoretical proposal obtain meaning only through advancing a constructive-interpretative methodology as the only path capable of bringing intelligibility to its concepts. This means that those theoretical concepts simultaneously embody an epistemological definition and epistemological consequences; they are not equivalent to reality, but are part of theoretical models through which subjective phenomena are studied. These concepts are never exhausted within scientific research. They are only pieces of intelligibility for advancing theoretical representation of questions that remain overlooked by other theories. Constructions and interpretations are not determined by results taken directly from the empirical field; they contain degrees of speculation without which science would not be a production of thought. The chapter defends the idea that scientific research is, above all, a theoretical production, which advances through the development of theoretical models of what is being studied through fieldwork.

### 2.1 Introduction

The dominance of positivism in psychology throughout its modern history has led to the naturalization of a single way of doing science, leading to the lack of epistemological and methodological questions. Even today, positivism is very influential

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in psychology. Such hegemony is not only to do with the absence of epistemological and methodological debates within psychology, and it is also closely related to the misuse of theory in psychology. This picture has been dominant in modern psychology, including Soviet psychology. One of the few exceptions to this picture of modern psychology was K. Lewin and his group.

The relationship between Lewin and Soviet psychology had its main representative in Vygotsky (Yasnitsky 2012, 2016; Zavershneva 2010, 2016). That relationship was current at the beginning of 1930, when Vygotsky again took up some of his foundational ideas developed in “The Psychology of Art.” However, unlike in “The Psychology of Art,” where Vygotsky’s theoretical reflection advanced together with new audacious methodological ideas, in the 1930s the author was more centered on new concepts and omitted methodological proposals oriented toward their study.

Lewin and his group, unlike Vygotsky, focused on the epistemological and methodological issues that their new concepts demanded to be used in psychological research. The use of experiment by Lewin and his group during its German period was far from the ascetic, non-interactive, and instrumental use of experiment within American psychology at the same period of time. Lewin and his group advanced theory and methodology hand in hand in such a way that methodology answers the demands of the theoretical construction of personality and motivation. Moreover, the epistemological questions associated with that relation were also discussed (Dembo 1993).

The advances in the study of motivation and personality, which was characteristic of Lewin’s work, turned out to be the main focus of Vygotsky between 1932 and 1934. Nonetheless, this was not the main line followed by Soviet psychology, of which the dominant trends throughout its history aimed to define a Marxist psychology as an objective and natural science, keeping positivistic principles invested with Marxism as its epistemological basis (González Rey and Mitjans Martínez 1989; González Rey 2009, 2014, 2017).

This chapter is oriented toward highlighting how the legacy of the aforementioned authors, taken together with other lesser known theoretical trends within Soviet psychology, which appeared, not rarely, to contradict each other in the official histories of that psychology, in fact had important points of convergence that implicitly brought light to subjectivity as a phenomenon. Subjectivity, as developed in our research line, is a theoretical system oriented toward studying a specific phenomenon, of which the uncertainty, complexity, uniqueness, contradictory, and dynamic character fall outside the categories that have historically characterized the hegemonic theories in psychology.

The main objective of this chapter is to show the close interdependency between theory, epistemology, and methodology, as reflecting three inseparable sides of our proposal on subjectivity (González Rey 1993, 1997, 2005, 2007). The concepts assembled in this theoretical proposal on subjectivity obtain meaning only through advancing the constructive-interpretative methodology as the only path capable of bringing intelligibility to its concepts. This means that those theoretical concepts, simultaneously embody an epistemological definition and can only be defined through a constructive-interpretative methodology based on that epistemology. The epistemological principles associated with this proposal on subjectivity are

(1) concepts are not equivalent to reality; they are part of theoretical models through which subjective phenomena become the subject of knowledge. (2) The concepts assembled in this theoretical proposal are never exhausted within scientific research. These concepts are only pieces of intelligibility for advancing theoretical representation of questions that remain overlooked by other theories.

The theoretical, epistemological, and methodological consequences of the inclusion of subjectivity as an important topic for cultural–historical psychology will be discussed in the next pages.

## 2.2 The Overlooked Articulation Between Theory, Epistemology and Methodology in Cultural–Historical Psychology

The absence of epistemological and methodological discussion within cultural–historical psychology has, to a great extent, been due to its dominant official trends, mostly oriented toward identifying Marxism with objectivity. Such identification has also led to an ontological<sup>1</sup> gap, as is clearly denounced by Abuljanova in the following statement:

Despite the fierce polemics between those addicted to a socio-psychological explanation of the psyche and the supporters of the physiological or cybernetic explanation, the position of both groups is identical. The attempt to materialize the psyche or assign it materiality through its identification with something different reveals the ant dialectical character of this form of knowledge, the inability to apply dialectic to the discovery of the specificity of psychic phenomena. (Abuljanova 1973, p. 49)

As a result of this gap related to the ontological definition of human psyche, Soviet psychology did not advance a theoretical system capable of defining the specific quality of human psyche in articulation with its cultural, social, and historical genesis. Soviet psychology exhibited the same fragmentation in terms of areas and concepts that characterized traditional psychology. The concepts of sense and *perezživanie* developed by Vygotsky (Vygotsky 1987, 1993) in the last period of his work were promissory as psychological units from which a new psychological system could emerge (Leontiev 1992; González Rey 2009, 2011; Zavershneva 2016). Nonetheless, those concepts, far from defining a new quality of psychological processes, only represented an integration of different psychological elements (González Rey 2016a, b).

The most successful attempt to advance toward a theoretical system within Soviet psychology was Leontiev's Activity Theory, which understood psyche as an epiphenomenon of object-based activity. Psychical concepts in this proposal were defined in terms of activity; for example, motive was identified as the object of the activity, while the internal, properly psychological, functions were identified by their structure

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<sup>1</sup>The term ontology is used here to define theoretical constructions through which a new theoretical field is founded, generating intelligibility about new questions from which new paths for research and practice are opened up.

as external operations with objects, which become internal through internalization. Leontiev omitted the use of the concept of psychological unit as defined by Vygotsky in his final works, replacing the emphasis on cultural mediators by object-based activity.

The replacement of psyche by activity as the ontological definition upon which psychology should be constructed was clearly expressed by one of Leontiev's closest collaborators:

Essentially, for a long time, we were forced to be content with the fact that some external correlations were established between activity and mental processes, for example, noting that given such and such specific characteristics of activity, or such and such a structure, such and such motivation of activity, and so forth, such and such changes in mental processes occur, although the mechanism of these changes and the very nature of these mental processes were never studied in particular. (Zaporozhets 1995, p. 14)

Vygotsky's unfinished attempt to advance on a new definition of consciousness, based on senses as its units (Leontiev 1992), was completely ignored by Leontiev and his group (Zavershneva 2016). The hypothetical psychological system on which Vygotsky seemed to be advancing in the last stage of his life was differently interpreted by different authors. For Yarochevsky (2007), for example, that system was personality, having *perezhivanie* as its unit, while for Leontiev (1992), Veresov (2017), Yasnitsky (2016), and Zavershneva (2016) the system was consciousness, having sense or *perezhivanie* as its psychological units.

The concepts of sense and *perezhivanie*, taken together with communication, as developed by the authors of the School of Leningrad (Ananiev 1977; Miasichev 1960; Lomov 1978, 1984; Bodaliev 1983), and with the principle of the unity of consciousness and activity, as defined by S. L. Rubinstein, represented important antecedents in advancing on subjectivity as a new ontological definition of a unique human phenomenon, whether social or individual, i.e., culturally, historically, and socially engendered. Subjectivity from this theoretical standpoint transcends the definition of psyche, advancing a new qualitative understanding of what historically has been understood as psychological processes, and specifying a new qualitative side of social functioning.

Sense, *perezhivanie*, communication, activity, and consciousness were concepts that had never been articulated with each other in Soviet psychology, being treated separately, rather than leading to new epistemological and methodological proposals for study. From my point of view, the ideological pressures on Soviet psychology were, to a great extent, responsible for that gap between theory, epistemology, and methodology. Any attempt to move forward in the specificity of human psychological processes ran the risk of being accused of idealism. The methodological support of research undertaken within the Activity Theory framework was experiment, oriented toward the study of cognitive functions.

The research carried out by Bozhovich, and her team was strongly influenced by Lewin and his group, both theoretically and methodologically. Bozhovich and her group simultaneously advanced research into, and the theoretical construction of, personality. They formed the only group that followed Vygotsky's concepts of *perezhivanie* and social situation of development in their research. Nevertheless,

despite advancing along a new path in qualitative research, within Soviet psychology, nothing epistemological or methodological arising from this kind of research was ever openly discussed.

Bozhovich, aware of the vagueness of Vygotsky's definition of the psychological nature of *perezhivanie*, argued:

In other words, what underlies *perezhivanie*, as we see it, is the world of children's needs—their impulses, desires, intentions, complexly intertwined with one another and interrelated with possibilities for meeting these needs. And this entire complex system of connections, the entire world of a child's needs and impulses, must be deciphered so that we can understand the nature of the influence external circumstances exert on children's mental development. (Bozhovich 2009, p. 70)

Despite the progress carried by this definition in relation to Vygotsky's work, and its clear identification of *perezhivanie* as being a concept of the motivational sphere of personality, Bozhovich did not advance a new ontological definition of *perezhivanie*; it continued to be an additive concept, similar to Vygotsky's definition. Sense and *perezhivanie* were defined by intertwining them with traditional concepts. Bozhovich's quotation brings light to an important methodological issue, stating that the interrelated psychological processes that lead to *perezhivanie* "must be deciphered." By saying this, Bozhovich, in fact, recognized the need to use interpretation to study *perezhivanie*.

Dembo, one of Lewin's closest collaborators, made an interesting contribution toward a new comprehension of psychological concepts, emphasizing their qualitative character. She wrote: "I had to get away from properties, which were static notions (not affecting other units) that did not permit understanding of the nature of psychological qualities in their totality or in their manifestation as single entities and occurrences" (Dembo 1993, p. 15).

In advancing the qualitative nature of psychological units, Dembo also advanced the qualitative nature of psychological research, putting theory and methodology together as two intermingled processes. The malleability and dynamic of such a unit fulfilled an important theoretical demand for advance in the topic of subjectivity. Concepts like the ones defined by Dembo (1993), such as psychological unit, in its dynamic and interactions, must characterize any proposal on subjectivity from a cultural–historical standpoint. The concept of psychological unit, as used by Dembo, is very similar to Vygotsky's definition of psychological unit. However, unlike Vygotsky, Dembo advanced the idea that units are closely interrelated, discussing new methodological issues for their study.

Dembo states:

I could no longer bear to deal with analysis of properties that were related to our senses yet unrelated from one psychological unit to another. Finally, I call for a change! What kind of change should it be? It developed into a long and stepwise change. It varied from a change in approach to a change in methodology to a change in constituents; finally, I permitted myself even to think of a change in the meaning of quality itself. (Dembo 1993, p. 18)

Focusing on the changeable psychological units in movement, Dembo advanced on methodological issues toward a qualitative psychology capable of overcoming the

objective principles that have historically ruled methodology in psychology. Dembo made explicit some methodological principles for the study of dynamic psychological units.

The material to be analyzed was no longer obtained by so-called objective, outside observers, but was reported by the subjects who actually experienced the happenings. I, as an investigator, changed from using objective observations to using experiential observations. In the specific analysis of donor-recipient relations (to be discussed later), I chose to deal with interpersonal relations of a definitive kind. (Dembo 1993, p. 19)

Transcending observation as the collection of “objective facts,” Dembo made a call to replace the idea of “data collection,” expressed in the metaphor “donor–recipient relations,” by an interactive researcher–participant communication that she defined as experiential observation. The fact that she stressed interpersonal relations as the basis of her qualitative research proposal was an important step ahead within the cultural–historical perspective. Dembo was influenced by phenomenology, as was Lewin; however, her emphasis on communicative interaction, involving emotions and values in research transcended interaction as a way to collect the expressions of the other, as emphasized in what has been identified as phenomenological research in psychology (Amatuzzi 2001; Giorgi 1995).

Dembo emphasized the study of emotions and values, as well as their presence in the living research process. She claimed:

What I want to stress is that experiential observations have access to topics closest to that with which we are dealing. It has a relation to, an impact on, and is influenced by, our values and emotional processes, and is related to our most active living, to goal setting and goal attainment, and is decisive in our close relations with other people and in our relation to ourselves. (Dembo 1993, p. 19)

It is quite astonishing that the relation between cultural–historical psychology, widely understood as the tradition inaugurated in Soviet psychology by the most relevant of its tendencies (González Rey 2017), and the positions of Lewin’s group were only pointed out by a few researchers during the Soviet period (Zeigarnik 1982). Three facts, in my opinion, were highly influential in this: (1) the way in which Vygotsky’s thought was institutionalized in Soviet and Western psychologies; (2) the neglect of Bozhovich’s work within the officially institutionalized Activity Theory, which is related to her late entrance within Western psychology; and (3) the fact that the legacy of Lewin’s group in Germany was overlooked after the Second World War. The following statement by Dembo supports my last conjecture: “The Department of Psychology at the University of Berlin in 1920s, where I studied was a very supportive place in terms of the breadth and depth of interest in looking for the most suitable material for qualitative psychological analysis” (Dembo 1993, p. 25).

The previously discussed situation within the cultural–historical perspective allows the following conclusions:

- (1) The articulation between theory, epistemology, and methodology remained overlooked within Soviet cultural–historical psychology, in which there prevailed an objectivistic, empirical, and natural approach to the study of cognitive

psychological function, and the main representatives of which were A. N. Leontiev and his followers.

- (2) K. Lewin and his group theoretically influenced the last stage of Vygotsky's work, which was followed by Bozhovich and her group both theoretically and methodologically. Despite the new paths opened up by Bozhovich and her group in psychological research on personality, subverting the positivistic principles that officially ruled Soviet psychology, the epistemological, and methodological consequences of their research have never been discussed.
- (3) The absence of methodological and epistemological discussion within Soviet psychology was a barrier for the development of a new ontological definition of the human mind as a culturally, historically, and socially engendered phenomenon. The theoretically promissory concepts developed by Vygotsky, and later by Bozhovich, the only Soviet psychologist who departed from Vygotsky's legacy in the study of personality, were, together with consciousness, the only proposals on psychological systems that appeared as an alternative to the monopoly of Activity Theory during the Soviet period. However, the gap of a new ontological definition, as identified by Abuljanova, and referred to above, has continued to be a challenge up until today.

The important steps forward taken by Dembo and Vygotsky in their definitions of psychological units remained out of focus for decades within the cultural–historical–psychological tradition. Our proposal on subjectivity opens up a new path along which to advance that legacy toward proposing a new ontological definition to human phenomena, whether social or individual. This generative character of subjectivity is one of its main attributes, breaking down the more adaptive view that has characterized the understanding of psyche in psychology, mostly as an epiphenomenon of external and internal forces. Bozhovich (1968) was the only Soviet psychology researcher to make explicit the generative character of personality.

The recognition of the generative character of subjectivity breaks down widespread social determinism in Soviet psychology, which led to an emphasis on assimilation and internalization as the two principal processes through which social influences were internalized.

### **2.3 Advancing a Theoretical Proposal on Subjectivity: Theory, Epistemology, and Methodology**

This proposal on subjectivity advances along the aforementioned discontinued paths from both Lewin's tradition and the Vygotsky–Bozhovich legacy. The concepts of psychological unit, sense, *perezhivanie*, and social situation of development represented important antecedents in advancing in terms of the topic of subjectivity from a cultural–historical standpoint (González Rey 2002, 2009, 2012, 2014, 2017(a)). Nevertheless, as commented on before, these concepts did not specify a new ontological domain capable of explaining individual and social through a shared quality

that results from the historical, social, and historical genesis of both the human mind and social functioning. Subjectivity specifies a new ontological definition, leading to a new theoretical domain that makes psychology and the social sciences compatible with one another.

Subjectivity was never explicit in the works of Vygotsky, Dembo, Lewin, Bozhovich, Freud, or any other of the classical authors oriented toward the definition of psychological systems in psychology. However, subjectivity as a phenomenon appeared implicitly in the constructions of all of these writers. For example, Vygotsky noted:

They didn't understand [referring to psychologists at the time] that a handicap is not just an impoverished psychological state, but also a source of wealth, not just a weakness but a strength. They thought that the development of a blind child centers on his blindness. The psychology of blindness is essentially the psychology of victory over blindness. (Vygotsky 1993, p. 57)

In this quotation, subjectivity is implicitly recognized by three of its main attributes: (1) subjectivity is not the objective nature of experience, nor the objective conditions of an individual, which define how reality and we, ourselves, are experienced; (2) the weakness or strength of one experience depends on the psychological resources that can be mobilized by an individual during that one experience; (3) the generative character of subjectivity as a system that developed itself through its own productions.

Traditionally, psychology has been based on concepts that were understood as reactions to certain stimuli or lived experiences, such as behavior, traces, types of personality (diabetic personality, epileptic personality, and so on), patterns of behaviors (pattern A or B of coronary behaviors), pathological entities. All these concepts share the following attributes: (1) They are defined by causes external to them, whether social or biological; (2) psyche is never made explicit, remaining implicit, or even being rejected in the taxonomy of concepts used by psychology; (3) it is possible to define all of them through descriptive procedures. Psychoanalysis represents a different psychology, the detailed analysis of which is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, psychoanalysis in most of its foundational trends also shares the ontological gap in relation to what psyche is. Its concepts are grounded in biological drives as the universal basis on which the structure of the psychical apparatus would develop.

Subjectivity as an ontological domain specifies a new kind of process, that is, qualitatively different from all the processes involved in its genesis. As such, subjectivity is ontologically defined by the integration of emotions and symbolical processes, forming new qualitative units: subjective senses. Such subjective senses are “snapshots” of symbolic emotional flashes that unfold in a chaotic movement, from which subjective configurations emerge as a self-regulative and self-generative organization of subjective senses (González Rey 2012, 2014, 2016).

Based on subjective senses and subjective configurations, social and individual subjectivity appear as a system within which one is permanently configured within the other through the specific subjective senses produced by each of them. Thus, for



example, each individual gender emerges in the intertwined flux of subjective senses within one subjective configuration. In this sense, gender is inseparable from other subjective senses resulting from the way in which individuals have lived multiple other social symbolical constructions in their lives. Subjective configurations actively assemble a constellation of subjective senses that characterize social and individual motivations, in which gender, religion, moral values, political norms, and many other possible social symbolical constructions appear as subjective units in a process within the subjective configurations.

Social subjective senses are not an abstraction that floats over individuals. They emerge as living subjective processes within social networks, characterizing any social space as an active system of related individuals, within which, once a social configuration emerges, it unfolds into new subjective social processes that are beyond individual intentions and control. Social subjective configurations function in the interweaving of wider social subjective productions resulting from social scenarios that are distant from and different from that in which a particular network is acting at the present moment, and from the different subjective individual configurations through which individuals singularly engage within a specific social subjectively configured group or network.

The concept of social subjectivity allows the explanation of how society, in its diverse levels, institutions, and processes, is configured recursively in all those diverse instances, making them living, contradictory, and heterogeneous social spaces, while also being configured in individuals whose active positions and behaviors are constituent of the different paths taken for all those social instances in their development. Social and individual subjective productions actively intertwine, each with others, in such a way that transcends individual conscious intention and socially declared proposals. Social subjectivity, unlike discourse, social representation and other social symbolical productions, always engages individuals as agents of its different subjective configurations, which are inseparable from those of such individuals.

Regardless of the pressures and the control exerted by a social order, the dominant groups can only temporarily control behaviors and expressions in that social instance within which they have become dominant. The silence of expressions is not equivalent to the passivity of subjectivity; subjective productions advance underground, and soon or later, change will emerge from them. It is in contexts like this that individuals emerge as subjects of contradiction, resistance, and change in that order. The concept of subject, whether social or individual, is a key piece of our theoretical proposal on subjectivity (González Rey 1995, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2014; González Rey and Mitjás 1989, 2016, 2017).

The inseparability of social symbolical productions and emotions in the ontological definition of subjectivity defines it as simultaneously a constituent of culture, social life, and individuals. These three different systems are subjectively configured and, as such, they are closely intermingled with one another. The social order is subjectively configured through discourses, social representations, myths, political beliefs, religion, and many other symbolical social constructions. However, its functioning and development will depend on the way that all these processes are subjectively configured in individuals, groups, social networks, and institutions.

The intermingled relationship between subjectivity and social symbolical productions, in which one is not reduced to the other, leads to a different psychology in which the classical borders of the cultural–historical approach are extended. Discourse, in itself, or any other symbolical social production, as social representation, does not exhaust the wide range of complex phenomena engendered by individual and social subjective configurations.

Subjectivity is a new quality of human realities and processes and, as such, social processes, culture, and history, although they are not reduced to their subjective configurations, are all subjective systems. Subjectivity cannot be reduced to psychology; however, this definition opens up an important new avenue for the development of a cultural–historical psychology.

At the same time, subjectivity allows a critical dialogue between cultural–historical psychology, based on the Soviet psychological legacy, and other psychological approaches that have increasingly considered culture as inseparable from their constructions, such as dialogical psychology, social constructionism, and critical social psychology. These approaches have appeared as critical reactions to individual perspectives centered on behavior and on metaphysical and universal intrapsychical definitions of psychical structures. Such critical reaction has been very useful to psychology, leading to the overcoming of the naturalization of human psyche. Nevertheless, focusing on cultural and social concepts like discourse, dialogue, narratives, and deconstruction, these critical psychologies (Gergen 1994; Harre 1995; Rose 1995) have overemphasized social symbolical productions to the detriment of individuals and their creative subjective repertoires, leading to a social symbolical and relational determinism. This determinism makes it impossible to understand how individuals and their active transformative actions are inseparable from the development of social processes and realities. Allowing such an integration between social symbolical realities, individual actions and practices, subjectivity, unlike discourse is formed by subjective senses and configurations that always carry emotions, establishing them as the motivational cores of social and individual behaviors. As a production, subjectivity opens up unpredictable subjective avenues within naturalized symbolical realities. Such a definition of subjectivity, despite its relations with psychological processes, transcends the domain of psyche, appearing as a different qualitative phenomenon that characterizes all human processes and relations, embracing all institutions and processes of any concrete society.

Subjective configurations are very dynamic subjective units that express the subjective system at the specific moment of its movement; human actions, psychological functions, dialogical processes, and different living experiences, integrate with each other within the flux of subjective senses generated by a subjective configuration. This theoretical representation of subjectivity makes it possible to overcome the dispersed taxonomy of concepts that has supported psychology up until the present, without specifying its psychological nature. Subjectivity does not exhaust psyche; on the contrary, subjectivity is a new quality that stands over the psyche. Any psychological function or process, when generated by a subjective configuration, is organized as a subjective core, around which a constellation of processes is organized as a part of its function. Imagination, fantasy, and intellectual processes can only be integrated

with each other through the flux of subjective senses that result from a subjective configuration, within which any psychological function becomes a new subjective unit of functioning.

Psychological processes are still understood as organized in the face of the demands of external conditions, without carrying the biography of the individuals configured in the ongoing action. Individual biographies appear in human experiences as living subjective biographies, within which individual experiences never result from the apparent objective facts to which an observer, or the individual himself or herself could attribute the cause of his/her behaviors.

The concepts assembled in this proposal on subjectivity carry an epistemological character for the following reasons:

- (1) Subjective senses and subjective configurations, due to their great malleability and mobility, form a flux within which one specific subjective sense becomes another in a constant movement that cannot be captured by an act of knowledge. Thus, they do not appear directly through language, behavior or any human relationship process. For this reason, subjective senses and configurations must be constructed only in indirect ways through a constructive–interpretive methodology.
- (2) Subjective senses and configurations are singular; thus, there are no specific individuals' or social group's behaviors, symptoms or experiences that, regardless of their similar character, express similar subjective configurations. This character of human subjectivity implies that knowledge of it is furthered through theoretical models that advance along an endless path within a research line. Inductive generalization is replaced by theoretical generalization based on theoretical models in continuous development, addressing the research objective.
- (3) The heuristic value of subjective senses and configurations results from the fact that they allow generation of intelligibility about processes that have been omitted in other theoretical approaches. For example, studying learning difficulties as subjective configurations allows an understanding of how different subjective senses, through which it is possible to access experiences related to family, gender, social status, race, and many other personal experiences that apparently have nothing to do with learning, appear closely interconnected within one subjective configuration related to all behaviors and feelings associated with the learning difficulties process. From these theoretical and epistemological perspectives, human experiences can never be reduced to relations between variables, because what is important is not the family or the child's group as abstractions, but the way in which the family or the child's group are subjectively experienced and how those experiences are subjectively produced by an individual within the subjective configuration of his/her ongoing experience. This configuration, in its intertwined flux of subjective senses, represents a "microcosmos" of the child's life.
- (4) As subjectivity can neither be studied directly from the explicit meanings of speech and language, nor from explicit behaviors, its study demands interpretive constructions of the researcher, which will first appear as conjectures based on the qualitative organization of language, speech, and behaviors, which high-

light implicit information. These conjectures, while carrying a well-defined, although hypothetical, meaning, have been defined as indicators (González Rey 2001, 2005). Assembling different convergent indicators by their meaning is the main criterion for advancing a more general and precise hypothesis related to subjective senses and configurations. Indicators only emerge as a result of the continuous dialogical process throughout which different methodological devices are articulated. The theoretical model is not a sum of facts, but a dynamic researcher's intellectual construction within which hypotheses, indicators, and the researcher's ideas are integrated into a new qualitative level of knowledge.

Taking into account the demands described above, it is possible to conclude that this theoretical proposal on subjectivity carries an epistemological character. The demands and paths described, in their inseparable integration, are based on the definition of "Qualitative Epistemology" (González Rey 1997). At the moment in which that term was coined, there were no other epistemological references capable of sustaining the paths advanced by us in psychological research.

The main reasons for advancing Qualitative Epistemology, as such, were: The emphasis on epistemology as the criterion that makes the difference between quantitative and qualitative research. In this sense, stressing a qualitative methodology demands answering to qualitative epistemological attributes, as well as the capability of answering new different ontological proposals from those oriented to the quantitative definition of psyche. As well as theory being implicitly related to a different epistemology, the relationship between them should also lead to a new methodological definition, a constructive-interpretative one. From this methodological definition, subjective senses and configurations cannot be defined as labels to classify observed behaviors or reactions, but as meanings on which intelligibility about new phenomena can be advanced to construct meanings based on them, which are not explicit. This proposal on subjectivity appears to be simultaneously a theoretical, epistemological, and methodological path within cultural-historical psychology. This condition is one more attribute of its cultural-historical character.

It is important, in the final stage of this chapter, to establish some differences with other ways of performing interpretation—psychoanalysis and postmodern discursive analysis. Freud was aware of the relevance of construction in psychoanalytic work (Freud 2011). However, the universal concepts on which psychoanalysis is based make construction impossible, since the analyst always has external well-established narrow constraints that rule interpretation. These theoretical constraints are a priori theoretical definitions, such as the Oedipus complex, the repressed contents that refer to early childhood experiences, early sexual drives, the concept of lack, the child's suffering in the mirror stage, and many others, depending on the psychoanalytic reference. These universal definitions, in fact, are the safe harbor from which all interpretations should come. Freud stated:

We all know that the person who is being analyzed has to be induced to remember something that has been experienced by him and repressed [...] His work of construction (he is referring to the analyst; my note), or, if it is preferred, of reconstruction, resembles to a great extent an archaeologist's excavation of some dwelling place that has been destroyed and buried or of some ancient edifice. (Freud 2011, pp. 10–11)

The quotation above is important to understand how any theory implicitly carries an epistemology. Freud, although using the word construction, immediately replaced it by reconstruction, which is the real function of the analyst for psychoanalysis. This is reaffirmed by Freud through the metaphor of the archaeologist, who assembles piece by piece the whole structure of a prior culture or civilization. However, archeologists work on objective prior realities, while psychology researchers work with living experiences. Nevertheless, the use of the same metaphor allows us to understand two important epistemological principles implicit in Freud's theory: lived experiences from the past remain as realities in the memory of patients, and their suffering is related to the distortion of those experiences by the mechanism of repression. Thus, the only way to suppress suffering is by returning to those experiences through interpretation, reestablishing them as they effectively occurred. This epistemological realism separates Freud from the topic of subjectivity as defined in this chapter.

More recently, S. Frosh, who made significant contributions to psychoanalysis, shared with Freud the possibility of obtaining "trust" during analysis: "The postmodern opposition to depth interpretation is well understood—the claim that looking underneath the surface for a true meaning is misguided and potentially authoritarian activity" (Frosh 2002, p. 85).

I completely agree with Frosh's criticism regarding the postmodern use of interpretation. Nevertheless, I disagree with his claim about the possibility of coming to a "true meaning." Like Frosh, I do not share the relativism of postmodern theories in psychology. However, epistemologically speaking, theoretical constructions must not be confounded with realities; concepts are not truths, they are intellectual devices for generating intelligibility about specific kinds of phenomena, on which new domains of human knowledge and practice could be founded. An endless chain of new theoretical constructions, new research and practice could be based on a new theoretically-ontologically defined system. This fact becomes the main criterion to legitimize a new theoretical domain in the sciences. Theories are always historical constructions, and they never exhaust the "real" character of the subject studied. This confusion can only occur when we depart from static, invariable, and universal concepts to define an invariable human ontology.

Our proposal on subjectivity departs from the principle that knowledge about subjective senses and subjective configurations is always incomplete, but is a way to address processes of human realities that specify a new ontological domain, making possible new representations and practices relating to our societies.

Postmodern theories like social constructionism have reduced interpretation to changeable discursive and linguistic productions that are completely meaningless in explaining the type of phenomena that gain intelligibility through subjectivity, as defined in this chapter. As discussed in this chapter, discursive practices do not permit the understanding of their significance for one another and for other human processes. As Frosh pointed out regarding social constructionism: "... all knowledge positions are constructed between people in language; in this sense, postmodernism is accommodated within social constructionism, the dominant philosophical base for family therapy" (Frosh 2010, p. 15).

Both paths in interpretation, the psychoanalytic and that coined as postmodern, are different from our proposal, at least in the following characteristics: Unlike psychoanalysis, our proposal does not depart from universally given concepts and does not intend to reconstruct distorted past experiences according to their real occurrence. Differently from social constructionism and other versions of postmodern thought in psychology, our proposal is based on the recognition of ontological definitions that are not engulfed by language or discourse. Moreover, this proposal not only deconstructs old concepts within psychology, but also highlights a new theoretical proposal with its complementary epistemological and methodological basis.

## 2.4 Some Final Comments

Subjectivity opens up new paths for research and practice within cultural–historical psychology, simultaneously allowing new dialogues with other psychological trends that have been historically ignored within cultural–historical studies.

Subjectivity allows the highlighting of human processes and phenomena that have not been the focus of attention of other theories, including most of the cultural–historical trends. This theoretical proposal, far from denying the cultural–historical principles on which the cultural–historical domain was founded, represents an extension of some of its more important and less well-known advances.

This proposal is sustained by the inseparable relationship between theory, epistemology, and methodology, sustaining not only theoretical advances, but new paths for conducting research and practice that correspond to its theoretical advances. Theory, by this definition, is a system that is permanently in development, one in which advances depend on new research and the opening up of new domains of practice, both of which are closely interrelated.

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