REGULAR ARTICLE

Gulliver's Eggs: Why Methods are not an Issue of Qualitative Research in Cultural Psychology

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Abstract The future of qualitative methods regards the kind of object cultural psychology is interested and the kind of questions it can ask. I propose that the object should be experiencing, understood as a complex whole, consisting of lived-by action and counter-action, that is contextual inter-action with the world in the form of an experiencing subject and otherness. The kind of questions cultural psychology can ask is instead related to the epistemological status attributed to both researcher and participant. Probably few scholars such as Vygotsky, Piaget and Lewin understood to what extent experiencing is always changing, because the relationship between mind, alterity and culture is co-generative. This also implies a relativization and a decentralization of the psychology's perspective. Finally, I provide some examples from the history of psychology and some suggestions to work at the level of such complexity by using methods that can work with complex objects such as products of human activity (e.g., art, literature, architecture, etc.).

Introduction: Gulliver's Eggs

Since I was a student, I found somehow weird and boring the quasi-religious war between qualitative and quantitative in social sciences as it was taught in university courses. At that time, I was not yet in psychological sciences, nevertheless, I felt that something was missing and that the methodological discussion was not really addressing the very interesting questions. It seemed to me that the affiliation to one of the creeds was *preceding* the actual research questions. This sensation has been somehow confirmed in the following years, and as far as I can see, even the colleagues participating in this discussion seem to share the same feeling. In this paper, I will try not to repeat what has been already discussed during the workshop. I will rather try to push my ideas further towards edge territories.

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The problem of qualitative versus quantitative methods reminds me the problem of Gulliver's eggs:

"the two great empires of Lilliput and Blefuscu. Which two mighty powers have, as I was going to tell you, been engaged in a most **obstinate** war for six-and-thirty moons past. It began upon the following occasion. It is allowed on all hands, that the primitive way of breaking eggs, before we eat them, was upon the larger end; but his present majesty's grandfather, while he was a boy, going to eat an egg, and breaking it according to the ancient practice, happened to cut one of his fingers. Whereupon the emperor his father published an **edict**, commanding all his subjects, upon great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs. The people so highly resented this law, that our histories tell us, there have been six rebellions raised on that account; wherein one emperor lost his life, and another his crown… Many hundred large volumes have been published upon this controversy: but the books of the Bigendians have been long forbidden, and the whole party rendered incapable by law of holding employments. During the course of these troubles, the emperors of Blefuscu did frequently **expostulate** by their **ambassadors**, accusing us of making a schism in religion, by offending against a fundamental doctrine of our great prophet Lustrog, in the fifty-fourth chapter of the Blundecral (which is their Alcoran). This, however, is thought to be a mere strain upon the text; for the words are these: 'that all true believers break their eggs at the convenient end.' And which is the convenient end, seems, in my humble opinion to be left to every man's conscience, or at least in the power of the chief magistrate to determine." (Swift 2005, 42)

Jonathan Swift summarizes in this ironic and subtle story all the ideological and dogmatic wars occurring place in human history. The traditional Lilliput/qualitative versus Blefuscu/quantitative controversy is a matter of eggs' breaking while the real goal is to eat the eggs, that is to ask the most useful questions in order to understand the phenomena at stake. As far as I know, all the methodology books (which are *psychologists*' Alcoran), at a certain point, state something that sounds like 'that all true believers choose the most suitable methods to answer their research question'. So, rather than discussing the well-established issue about qualitative methods in psychology and which is their future and superiority in respect to quantitative methods, I will rather ask which kind of questions about the qualities of studying psychological phenomena we should ask, agreeing with Carolin Demuth who clearly pointed that procedures are rooted in epistemologies. To accomplish this task, I must first stress which idea of psychological sciences I am talking about, at least to my field of expertise in cultural psychology, and which kind of phenomena psychology is dealing with. Nevertheless, I think that the discussion could be useful also to other fields of qualitative psychology.

The Object of Psychology

The object of cultural psychology, as I understand it, is experiencing. The process of experiencing includes the *whole*, consisting of lived-by action and counter-action, that is contextual inter-action with the world in the form of an experiencing subject and otherness. For analytic purpose we can say that action is a combination of behavior (or its absence, avoiding behavior) and a mental symbolic process associated to it. Thus,

any behavior without mental process or a subject experiencing is not an object of interest for psychology (e.g., machines simulated behavior), neither any symbolic process without a concrete subject doing something is object of psychology (e.g., formal logic positivism). Experiencing is a process involving a flesh and bone subject, whose mental and physical domains are *supervenient*, though can be studied at different levels. In this respect, I subscribe to Donald Davidson's position:

> "Such supervenience might be taken to mean that there cannot be two events alike in all physical respects but differing in some mental respect, or that an object cannot alter in some mental respect without altering in some physical respect." (Davidson 1980, 214)

This postulate tells us that experiencing is embodied, that there is some correspondence in the description of psychophysiology and higher mental functions, and that the biological is the ground for the psychological not its explanation. Now, let's move a step further. The question is whether there can be two events very alike in all physical and mental respects.

Every experience is characterized by uniqueness and similarity of experiences that feed into each other in irreversible time (Salvatore et al. 2013) and the nature of experiencing in developing human beings is characterized by learning and change (Tateo and Marsico 2014). Besides, the logic of psychological processes is co-genetic (Herbst 1995), so that the actualization of experience calls into existence its negative or non-actualized counterpart. Here originates a theoretical and methodological paradox of studying experiences, for psychology seems requiring to locate experience in space and time in order to study it. As we know since William James, psychology is coping with this paradox by segmenting the flow of experience (James 1950). Such a segmentation is based on the idea that every experience is located in space and time: "every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope" (Bakhtin 1996, 258). If we agree with Donaldson's postulate, then we have two dimensions of chronotope: the meaning construction which is located in a consensual time and place (the temporality of experience); and the physiological correlate which is located in a physical time and space (the neurophysiology of experience). The problem of locating immediately appears a slippery slope to common sense. I could hardly convince my research subject that if she has two physical states identical in all respects she will have the same mental experience in all respects. I could probably persuade her that the two experiences are similar in some respect, but that is trivial. This is the reason for the object of psychology cannot be formulated in terms of *states*.[1] Nevertheless, the reductionist postulate of the direct correspondence between physical and mental experiences is ultimately treating experiences as they could be

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[1] The term "state" could sound a bit old-fashioned. Nevertheless, only in year 2013, PsychINFO Database reports 342 original peer-reviewed journal articles using this term in the abstract. It is used of course with different meanings in very each area of psychology (e.g., Schizophrenia & Psychotic States; Health & Mental Health Services; Promotion & Maintenance of Health & Wellness; Educational Administration & Personnel; Social Processes & Social Issues; Professional Personnel Attitudes & Characteristics; Curriculum & Programs & Teaching Methods; Professional Education & Training; Classroom Dynamics & Student Adjustment & Attitudes; Behavior Disorders & Antisocial Behavior; Community & Social Services). Even though this is just a superficial observation, it tells us that the term is still in wide use.

repeatable and replicable. Or at least that is how methods are understood in different areas of psychology.

Experiencing, Signs and Culture: How Pierce's Philosophy Can Help

The picture I have drawn so far could look too cold, *internalistic* and egocentric. What we call experience is in fact a complex configuration of cognitive, affective and ethic dimensions. The experiencing subject relates to the world by affectively knowing and anticipating, by loving and hating before deceiving, by ambiguously doing and ethically accounting. It is the quick and dirty work of experiencing and actively looking for experiencing even before it happens. A discrete psychological state, a *pure* and unambiguous cognitive or emotional act is a kind of *chimera* theoretically superimposed by some scholar. Besides, we have *culture in mind* and *mind in culture* (Valsiner 1998). Culture is the counterpart that co-defines:

> "the uniqueness of my inner experience and my agentive capability of making distinction between what happen, or used to happen, to me and what relates to others. When I produce a discourse about my feeling guilty or anguished, I can say that I feel 'like' Rodion Raskolnikov in Dostoyevsky's novel 'Crime and punishment'. I can also say that I feel "like" my friend felt once. But at the same time, I am conscious that my feeling is a unique event that is not perfectly framed in a pre-formed fashion or captured by the same signs already used by myself or by others in the past (James 1950). 'Humans consist of present, future, and past; sign, interpretant, and act; I, you, and me; and all the overlap, and connectedness, and solidarity among these elements' (Wiley 1994, 216)." (Tateo and Marsico 2013, 5)

We are here in presence of a trialogic Peircean configuration of elements that characterizes experience (Peirce 1935). There is the *Firstness* of experience, the process of becoming aware of something happening, its uniqueness and indefiniteness in the flow of experiencing continually feeding itself in irreversible time. There is the *Secondness* of the distinctive character of experience, the process of identification, that is experiencing the otherness *through* the otherness, the irreducible alterity of the world, which is experienced through our own feeling of being alien to the world. Finally, there is the *Thirdness* as element of mediation between Firstness and Secondness, that is all we have experienced and all that has been experienced by others as we know it. "It brings whatever was Firstness together into interaction with the Secondness of the Firstness in the same way that it enters into its own interrelationship with that Firstness and that Secondness" (Merrell 2005, 70). The temptation is strong to identify Firstness with the *presentation* of the world, Secondness with the intersubjective *representation* and Thirdness as the cultural frame that sets the conditions for interpretation, establishing a temporal and logical hierarchy. In this case, it would be a mere problem of levels of analysis, I rather think that there is more than this, that the issue is far more complex. The relationship between Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness is interrelation, interaction and interdependency (Peirce 1935), that is a co-genetic process that goes back and forth from the subject experiencing to the cultural frame that makes sense of the alterity. "Even universally experienced aspects of our world are context-

bound and 'generated' in the sense that they are contingent upon firmly shared background conditions of a biological-ecological nature" (Rommetveit 1992, 20). On the other hand, it is the experience of alterity that makes the cultural frame of interpretation salient to the subject and helps her to define the experience as subjective. "Human cognition is inherently dual, in the sense that its product is informative about the observer as well as about the observed" (Rommetveit 1992, 21).

Once Firstness and Secondness call for Thirdness with the role of defining each other, there history emerges in the construction of temporality (Tateo 2015a). Any product of human activity creates an universal and abstract representation of life starting from very situated individual actions. Such institutionalized representation, which is at the same time epistemological, ethical and aesthetical, becomes a tradition - that is the framework distanced from the individual immediate experience - within which the meaning of the experiences to be make sense in return. "Aspects of that 'external' world generated on the basis of firmly shared ecological-cultural background conditions tend to become objectified and acquire the status of social realities" (Rommetveit 1992, 22).

The relationship between Firstness and Secondness is not just the constitution of the Ego and the Alter, of the subject and the world, for the world is also Thirdness and Firstness. Secondness is also the *non-Firstness*, its non actualized alternative which is immediately co-genetically evoked and that persists in development. Different dimensions supervene in the process of experiencing. A short example could clarify the process.

Many people soon or later in life are confronted with the choice of the university programme. You can probably remember that your 'cognitive' process of choosing an area of study was charged with affective and ethical issues, with fears, desires expectations, pressures and requirements. Even though you *felt* to be made for studying psychology, was not easy to contemplate and compare alternatives. The fact itself of inclining towards one choice called into existence the opposite choices. Becoming a psychologist implies not becoming something else (a lawyer, an engineer, etc.). Your cultural background was playing a role in interpreting the situation and making sense of the different options. Significant others were somehow involved in the process, as a source of comparison, suggestions, guidance. But soon or later, the process went back to yourself. In some specific moment in time you experienced the ambivalence of the co-genetic presence of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness defining each other ("*I can do (or be) it but won't do (or be) it*"; "*I cannot do (or be) it but will do (or be) it*"; "*I cannot do and won't do it*"; "*I can do it and will do it*"; "*I cannot do it now but…*"; "*I could do it now but…*"; "*I could do like (someone else) but…*"; "*I cannot do like (someone else) but…*", etc.). This process can also be described in terms of actions and counter-actions, promoting and inhibiting, change and resistance to change. In each case, it is not possible to grasp the experience without referring to the co-generation of the subject's experiencing and the otherness. As the beginning of the academic year was approaching, sooner or later you made your mind. You decided to enroll in the psychology programme. It seems that once the choice is made, the relationship is dissolved and the non-actualized alternatives no longer exist. Instead, another aspect of co-presence emerges. As a psychology student, I am no longer (not yet) something else and I am no longer (not yet) like someone else: the interpretative process feeds forward (Valsiner 2014a). Once I define my experience in terms of existence, I evoke the non-

existing and the existing otherness. "Identification is a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification – the subject – is itself always ambivalent, because of the intervention of that otherness" (Bhabha 1990, 211). But once I produce an interpretation in terms of Thirdness, I somehow constrain myself in the guidance of a specific culturally bounded trajectory (Valsiner 2014a). Interpretation is at the same time promoting and inhibiting action. Action (or non-action) is at the same time mediated by Thirdness and experience is mediated by action (or non-action) in return. Experience is also embedded and embodied in the corpus, the corps and the bodies, in all the system of artifacts, movements, rituals and metaphors (Merrell 2005; Tateo 2014).

Such complexity is overwhelming for any kind of methodological approach, no matter if more reductionist, more phenomenological or somewhere in the middle. Especially because we don't need just to take into account different levels of analysis, but we must also take into account how actualized events relate to non-actualized events, both concurring in the co-generation of experience. How psychology would study the case of our psychology student? Which kind of methods should be applied? Of course, in literature we can find thousands of studies, both quantitative and qualitative, focusing on the academic choices of psychology students, with several mix of methods and different results. In the following section, I will argue instead that the starting point is what kind of questions is worth asking in order to understand the process of experiencing.

What Methods for What Questions?

First of all we should bear in mind that there are usually different accepted meanings of *asking questions* (Creswell 2009). For instance, there can be research questions (e.g., "whether cooperative or competitive situations are more effective as motives to work and effort on the part of human beings") and instrumental questions, whether in questionnaire, an interview, an observation grid, etc. (e.g., "What do you do in your spare time?"; "How many times A does X in an hour?"). The two types of questions are strictly related, to the extent that the first belongs to the realm of theory and the second to the realm of methods. Asking the right question, in both cases, is a kind of art (Varzi 2001). In fact, what we ask can make perfect sense to us but trigger silly or useless answers, or can leave out exactly what could be more interesting or useful to understand. The probability of such an unfortunate event to happen is fairly high, if we take into account the complexity of experiencing as above described. Nevertheless, a large part of psychology seems more concerned with leading back participants' answers to a normative frame (Brinkmann 2007). This is probably due to the fact that the discipline originates as a science of prediction and control of behavior (Valsiner 2012). We can learn a lot from different approaches in psychology and neighbor sciences. On the one hand, we have psychotherapy which is interrogating both epistemologically and methodologically about the forms of therapeutic relationship and its instrumental role (Mörtl and Gelo 2015; Salvatore 2011). Here the relationship between of normativity and knowledge development is acquiring a new meaning. Methodologically, the interplay between qualitative and quantitative methods is being more and more subordinated to the kind of questions psychotherapy research is asking (Mörtl and Gelo 2015). On the other hand, we have, for instance, the ethnometodology's

epistemological approach which is leading back the contextuality of research questions to the local order of phenomenal field (Garfinkel 2002). Thus, the researcher is requested to tune up in situ (Liberman 2013) with the community of people he wants to understand. Even though discussing the different approaches is out of the scope of the present article, I would also mention the case of discourse analysis, whose main goal is to understand the way language is used to accomplish individual and collective projects (Starks and Trinidad 2007). The theoretical and epistemological approaches, I just mentioned are among those who share the idea of voicing the participants rather than imposing the normative framework of the researcher. This goal is often achieved through the microgenetic analysis of interactions that is aimed at observing the process in its development.

I think that cultural psychology can develop a new epistemological stance within general psychology to overcome the problems I discussed above. Two examples from the history of psychology could help me to shed light on the issue of the research and instrumental questions with respect to the understanding of experiencing.

A Question of Curiosity

The first example is the report of Gordon Allport about his juvenile visit to Sigmund Freud (Allport 1967; Morey 1987). In 1920, when Allport was a young American Protestant aged 22 spending some time in Europe to finish his education, he decided to satisfy his curiosity by requesting Freud for a visit. Allport reports that Freud invited him in his private office and, in Allport's own words:

> "He did not speak to me but sat in expectant silence, for me to state my mission. I was not prepared for silence and had to think fast to find a suitable conversational gambit. I told him of an episode on the tram car on my way to his office. A small boy about four years of age had displayed a conspicuous dirt phobia. He kept saying to his mother, 'I don't want to sit here…don't let that dirty man sit beside me'…When I finished my story Freud fixed his kindly therapeutic eyes upon me and said, 'And was that little boy you?' Flabbergasted and feeling a bit guilty, I contrived to change the subject." (Allport 1967, 7–8)

The episode is a bit more articulated, and there have been several interpretations of what had actually occurred between the two prominent scholars in this kind of historical encounter, whether it was a complete misunderstanding or a subtle play at different levels of explicit and implicit communication (Morey 1987). Nevertheless, my scope in reporting here a short piece of the story is that of illustrating an issue that has been raised several times in the workshop discussion by Brinkman and Mey. Often, in qualitative research and particularly in interviewing as the principal and most common method, the researchers assume the total *transparency* of their research questions. In other words, even when researches are aware that the interview situation is not a simple extraction of information from a subject but is an actual co-construction through communication and engagement of the participants (Rommetveit 1992), the research question(s) are given as clear and transparent (that is neutral to the participant) so that they do not exert any power on the interview situation. The example of Allport and Freud, instead, show how there is a huge difference between research question and

curiosity in interaction. For both Allport and Freud there was no transparency at all in their respective research questions that led to a kind of misleading of the encounter. Allport wanted to know Freud in person, so apparently he was in the position of the researcher. But when he found himself in presence of the famous founder of psychoanalysis, he realized that he didn't have any research question, he just had curiosity. On the other hand, the potential interviewee, Freud, replied with a genuine interview question. Were the roles reversed? Or instead we realize that qualitative methods are related to both research questions and curiosity, that you need both to engage in such an approach? This example show us that curiosity and research questions are on both sides of the interaction. We don't have a situation in which the participant provides a response to a researcher's stimulus, we rather have answers. We have Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness at work on *both* sides. This means that the authorship and agency is continuously passing from one to another. I am not talking about the micro-genetic process of co-construction of meaning, which has been fairly documented in qualitative research. I am rather talking about the issue of recognizing that the participant has research questions and curiosity as much as the researcher. I am talking here about an epistemological level, rather than an interactional level. It is not a matter of co-adapting each other, rather is a matter of recognizing the participant's epistemological legitimacy to ask the researcher her own research questions as part of the process of experiencing: probably Freud's untold legitimate research question to Allport was the same that several participants in interviews would have asked to the researchers "Why are you asking me this question?".

The second example is about asking questions in the context of qualitative methods and comes from Karl Buehler's study of the thinking process (Buehler 1951). Buehler never had in mind a label such as "qualitative methods" and he was conducting *experiments*, instead. He investigated the process of thinking through introspective method (the bugbear of mainstream psychology for decades). What I find extremely interesting in Buehler's method is that, far from considering introspection as a biased way of guiding subject's response, he conceived questioning in a highly structured an educated interaction with the subject as a way to build a common ground and a common language to facilitate understanding between researcher and participant. The method provided that the subjects were presented sentences of complex meaning, such as "We depreciate everything that can be explained". The subjects (fellow psychologists) were instructed to immediately answer "yes" if they understood or "no" in case of lack of understanding. Thereafter the subjects were asked to report the experience that preceded their response. The reports were recorded and analyzed. The first issue I find very interesting is that the researcher is asking if the subject understood. Of course, Buehler's study focuses exactly on the way we achieve understanding of both manifest and deep complex meanings of sentences through connections of different thoughts. Nevertheless, I wonder how many interviewer take for granted that the participant has understood the question and that the understanding is the same of the researcher.

I have a short autobiographic episode that can exemplify the problem of understanding. Not long ago I went to the hospital for a pain at my chest. All the doctors I met were asking me to describe the entity of the pain on a 10 point ordinal scale. I was answering that the intensity was around 6–7, probably not that much, but then I tried to explain that my problem was not the intensity of the pain, but its being continuous after 24 h. I was asked all the time about the *magnitude* of pain, even though in a *qualitative*

way, but the understanding of the doctors was completely different from mine, because I was trying to talk about the *quality* of my pain (Michell 2010).

I apologize for the short digression and try to come back to the main argument, that is the way of asking questions in qualitative methods. There are a lot of handbooks explaining the correct way of formulate utterances in questioning, but I will now quote and discuss an excerpt from Buehler's study on the process of connection between different thoughts in the experience of understanding complex meanings (Buehler 1951) that has to do with a more general conception about the research interaction. In particular, Buehler was analyzing how "the relation between the thought to be comprehended and a familiar thought is brought to consciousness by a conscious logical relationship" (Buehler 1951, 49). A typical report of the interaction between researcher and subject looks like the following:

> "(Do you understand?) 'The most glowing colors in which the virtues shine are the inventions of those who lack them.' Yes (21″).[2] 'First, again helplessness; I was unable to bring the possession and lack of virtues into the required contrast. There was a search connected with this (perceptually represented only by eye movements, as though shifting back and forth on a surface), interrupted by occasional reverberations of the words, now of the first, now of the second part of the sentence. Then comprehension came suddenly with an affect like 'Aha!'[3] 36 (not spoken); the basis of comprehension was the farfetched analogy, or as I would prefer to put it, a superordinate relationship: one prizes most highly what one lacks. Comprehension was tied in with this, and I said yes." (Buehler 1951, 49)

In this excerpt I can see a very interesting attempt to grasp the complexity of thought experience, including not only the take of a meta-cognitive position by the subject, but also the description of the emotional and embodied dimensions of the process. In fact, as Mey and Brinkman pointed out in the workshop discussion, we often assume the *spontaneity* of the participant as a source of reliability for her account. In other words, we are seeking for access to the *real* psychological life as there was a "given" (Sellars 1963) and spontaneous phenomenon that we shall try to pick up with some kind of methodological tweezers without contaminating with our hands. But in this way, even when we agree in principle with the idea that the data are co-constructed in the researcher participant interaction, we are a kind of diminishing participant's epistemological stance. In a certain sense, we don't *trust enough* our participants in order to fully involve them in the research interaction. In Buelher's method, instead, we can see a full co-participation of the researcher and the subject in the reconstruction of the experience and a focus on the process in relationship to the content of thinking. The result is a very rich and articulated account of the understanding process, in which the subject is able to report the experience as a whole, including its emotional and physical aspects: "the characteristic experience of comprehension takes place between wholes" (Buehler 1951, 51–52). Am I advocating a return of the introspection in the future of qualitative methods? I don't know. What I know is that to the extent auto-ethnography is considered a legitimate method in qualitative research, we could learn from

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[2] Subject's reaction time in seconds.
[3] This is probably the first historical mention of the so-called *aha-experience*.

Wuerzburg's school and reflect upon potential developments of a new epistemological stance of the participants in qualitative methods of psychology.

How to Cook Eggs? We Need Psychological Imagination

I have argued that the future of qualitative methods must be grounded in the discussion about the object of psychology and the epistemological relationship between the subject and the researcher. This implies assuming a meta-theoretical point of view, exactly in the same way Gulliver decided to solve the never-ending conflict between Lillupt and Blefuscu thanks to his "meta" point of view. He was for sure assisted by his height that allowed him to have a global view of the conflict, but we can try to stand on giants' shoulder, too. Facing a ship invasion from Blefuscu, he went to the harbor where the enemy fleet was waiting, tied at the prow all the battle ships together and started to draw them to Lilliput's port. But a received ideological vision is very difficult to change. So, when he "began to pull; but not a ship would stir, for they were all too fast held by their anchors, so that the boldest part of my enterprise remained" (Swift 2005, 46). What next? The only way to solve the problem is to cut the theoretical anchoring of the vessels with a sharp knife. What we need today is to overcome the discussion between qualitative and quantitative methods per se replacing our given epistemological views with something new. We must move forward from the problem of how to break the eggs to the more interesting problem of how to *cook* them for improving our delight of knowledge. I have no ready-made solutions for that problem, I can just try to stress some points that can be useful for advancements.

I will try to summarize this kind of *think-aloud* by starting from the problem of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness. I would say that the problem of the materiality of the subject, as stressed by Brinkman in the discussion, originates in a misunderstanding that considers the given of psychological life as a form of immediate Firstness of the subject. There is something *in* the person that happens and that does not need anything else but the right method to be grasped. Paraphrasing William James (1950), I would call it the psychologist's ontological fallacy. Psychology often deals with non-existing objects (Valsiner 2014b), concepts and metaphors like mind, culture, intelligence, identity, self system, personality traits, etc. These constructs are theoretical elaborations build to understand processes, but soon or later they become things through the symbolic artifacts that the discipline develops to measure and talk about them (Tateo 2013). When a process is reified into a thing, loses is attributes of dynamicity and multidimensionality. It acquires properties, parts and features that can be measured (Michell 2010), it also acquires causality relationships: things *do* things. Reification is basically a conceptual and linguistic operation of abstraction that transforms processes into their outcomes. For instance, when the idea of "culture", which is commonly used by several approaches, from a conceptual tool to understand a process becomes a non-existing object, it acquires the capability to cause some outcomes and can be than used to explain phenomena, like in the case of cross-cultural psychology, in which culture becomes a variable to explain individual variability (Fig. 1).

We could for instance explain Allport visit to Freud in terms of cultural differences, but would we understand what actually went on? The same happens with biological reductionism, when we understand it as the cause of psychological processes, while it is the base for it. In the same fashion, culture is a condition for psychological processes,
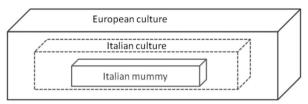
Fig. 1 The Sarcophagus model of culture

but is not a variable to explain them. I call this the *Sarcophagus model* of culture, because you can distinguish like matrioskas between cultures, sub-cultures, etc. and at the end you will lose the richness of living individual experience. The same can be observed with concepts like personality. Once we reify it, distinguishing it in parts, the personality traits, that can be measured as stable entities, then personality can be used to explain further phenomena or behaviors. The process of reification swipes off the historical dimension of psychological processes. It is an epistemological move that naturalizes the *explanans* in Thirdness, relegating the *explanandum* in Firstness, but we argued that the story is far more complex. If one considers intelligence, for instance, as a things that can be measured, it loses any genetic dimension, as well as the fact that cognition, affection and action are always parts of a whole, and they are an action upon the situation. Probably, psychologists such as Vygotsky, Piaget and Lewin understood very well to what extent experiencing is always changing, because the relationship between mind, alterity and culture is co-generative. This also implies a relativization and a decentralization of the psychological sciences' perspective. "Psychologists, as well as social scientists, should indeed think well before finishing any sentences the subject of which is 'man'" (Wright Mills 1959, p 163).

This implies that we cannot rely in reductionism(s), neither biological reductionism nor linguistic reductionism, to understand any psychological phenomenon. In the case of qualitative research, I think that we have fallen into the trap of linguistic reductionism by relying on the exclusive use of a basic analysis of language to access the richness of experience. This is a fundamental argument against the use of interviewing as main qualitative tool in qualitative psychology. A lot of content, narrative and discourse analysis techniques rely on the reduction of language in units of analysis that are a kind of impoverished form of the myth of the given (Sellars 1963). Buehler guided introspection, to some extent, is far more complex and articulated in accessing mental processes than any kind of semi-structured or in-depth interview. By taking participant's word and treating it as an external object on which different analysis methods can be applied, I think that qualitative research is epistemologically adopting the same reductionist view of neurophysiology, that takes configurations of electrochemical activity in the brain to be an unit of analysis representing more complex psychological processes. There can be no Firstness to study without taking into account Secondness and Thirdness as parts of a totality.

As I stated above, if the object of psychological sciences is experience, and experience is a whole including different dimensions, we must consider to work at the level of such complexity by using methods that can work with complex objects such as products of human activity (e.g., art, literature, architecture, etc.). We can find traces of this idea since philosophers like Giambattista Vico (Tateo 2015b) and psychologists like Theodore Lipps (Valsiner 2014a).

"If we want to find out the elements and laws of mental life it is not enough to study the single individual in its special states. A study is also required of human works and ideals, in which the nature of mental life is revealed throughout the ages. There exists no mental life in general. It appears in different forms at different times and places, and it strives to develop itself as fully as possible in every one of these forms, though the totality of its elements has a different timbre in every special case" (Höffding 1905, 76).

In this sense, we must consider that the process of meaning-making, in which qualitative research is mainly interested, is not given as a Firstness to the researcher, but it is experienced by *both* the researcher and the participant as an immediate encounter (Firstness) with the world and the other (Secondness) in relation the historical and cultural conditions of interpretation (Thirdness). In this sense the absence and presence are complementary aspects of experiencing. Revealing/hiding, continuity/discontinuity, forgetting/remembering, permanence/ephemeral are the processes of meaning making. Language is not the main content of experience, as again Buelher's introspection experiments show:

"'Do you know where our other stop-watch is now?' Yes (5″)'… I immediately had an image of the rooms of our institute and of the big chest in the middle room. I looked it over quickly. Then I thought: presumably there (spoken internally). An image appeared immediately, like an automatic reaction. Only after this 'presumably there' did thinking start. It was as though only this gave meaning to the image." (Buehler 1951, 47)

Iconicity and absence of iconicity are complementary forms of sense-making. Meaning is elaborated always in linguistic *and* iconographic forms. One of Giambattista Vico's most important arguments was that through imagination we build things acting as they were abstractions, and build abstractions acting as they were real things (Fig. 2) (Tateo 2015b).
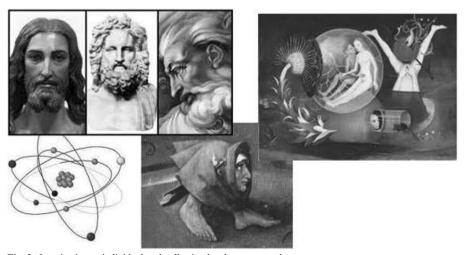

Fig. 2 Imagination at individual and collective level creates regulatory systems

An useful hint comes again from Vico, who argued that the distinctive feature of human nature is the capability of creating products of civilization -namely divinity worship, marriage and burials- as self-regulatory systems. The constant (re)novation of the social world is made possible through the complementary movement of abstraction and reification as feature of semiotic activity. This is why metaphorical and imaginative thinking are always present.

Conclusion

How can we study these dimensions in the future developing qualitative methods? I can just draw some suggestions. The first point is that we cannot rely only on interviewing as the main source of knowledge for understanding experiencing. In particular, we must be very careful in treating 40 min of guided discussion, as Mey highlighted during the discussion, as *specimen* of experience. We cannot expect to grasp the wholeness of the experience by segmenting experience into basic linguistic unit of analysis and then recombine them into abstract categories or themes, for we are falling into the problem of naturalizing those categories and using them back to explain experience. Secondly, we must bear in mind that experiencing is a complex process involving cognitive, bodily, affective and ethical dimensions (Tateo 2014). Thirdly, the symbolic processes involved in experiencing always include both linguistic and iconic signs, so our methods must be able to deal with both. Finally, we must learn to ask questions that cover both the existing and its not-actualized counterpart, and look forward to the potentialities of forward feeding process of experiencing. We must then learn how to look at "mental development prospectively" (Vygotsky 1978, 87). I have tried here to outline an epistemological approach which is not only based on semiotic perspective, though often Pierce's work is mainly understood in these terms. My proposal is to re-focus general psychology on the study of experiencing as a whole, including multiple dimensions. This has of course implications on the methodology because none of the existing qualitative methods *alone* can help us in grasping experiencing. We need new recipes to cook our eggs and, most important, we must be aware that our recipes co-evolve with the object of our study.

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