



The Dynamic Nature of the Human Psyche and its Three Tenets: Normativity, Liminality and Resistance—Semiotic Advances in Direction of Modal Articulation Sensemaking

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Received: 7 March 2021 / Revised: 2 April 2021 / Accepted: 3 April 2021 / Published online: 12 April 2021
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Abstract

The human psyche is relational, transient, and tensional. It instantiates itself by an ongoing constructive process of sensemaking in terms of dynamic configurations of person/world/others systems. Semiotic mediation (namely the sign interface in the course of the experience and the development) offers the conditions for the possibility of thinking, feeling, acting, and constructing systems of relationships. Valsiner elaborates three universal tenets of the human psyche: *normativity*, *liminality*, and *resistance*. In my opinion, they address three major concerns: (a) tension between “stability” and “change,” (b) relation between “immediacy” vs “mediateness of the experience,” (c) ambivalence between “substance” and “relationality.” Following I consider the notion of “modal articulation” as my contribution to develop in semiotic terms the dynamic core of human psyche. Modal articulation refers to processes of sensemaking of one’s experience mediated by the modal categories of necessity, possibility, will, and knowledge. The modal articulation allows a dynamic focus on sensemaking processes in terms of affective, identity, relational and agentic construction. Modal articulation works alongside the three main functions of *connection* (between affects and meaning), *mediation* (in terms of identity-intersubjectivity bonds), and *vectorization* (by directing the agentic trajectory).

Keywords Dynamic nature of psyche · Semiotic mediation · Normativity · Liminality · Resistance · Modal articulation

The Inherent Temporality of Human Experience

Signs as mediators of the psyche. How do signs emerge?

Why are they necessary? The necessity to create signs is a result of uncertainty of living—the need to make decisions at bifurcation points (Figure 2.1.). If there were no uncertainties in human living—necessities to make decisions at critical points where multiple possibilities exist—there would be no need for the invention and use of signs to reflect upon

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the life course. Only when such uncertainty exists—at bifurcation points—is the invention of signs necessary. The bifurcation point is a technical term that specifies the basic uncertainty about the future in the organism’s life course. Where there is a life course there is always ambiguity of the future (as the field of possibilities for the future can be unclear) or ambivalence—even if the opportunities are clear, the decision between clear options may give the organism tension. This starts from basic approach-avoidance tension (Hood, 1995). In the human case it entails the invention or importation of a sign that imbalances the choice in one or another direction at the bifurcation point (Valsiner, 2021/in press, p. 34).

[...]

As the new sign emerges in time, its main function is to prepare the meaning maker to future encounters with probable and possible life events. These future encounters are pre-emptively prepared with the focus on what is possible—a range that may have a clear border (e.g. “miracles will not happen”, or “there is no afterlife”) or a vague one (“maybe there is Hell”). Within these borders the probable future courses of events get an affective pre-structure (“X might happen and I would like it” or “I really do not want Y to happen”). Through the construction and use of signs human beings live forward towards the future as they are involved in meaning-making on the border between the past and the future (Valsiner, 2021/in press, p. 46).

I consider the above excerpts from Jaan Valsiner’s last book “*New General Psychology: foundation for a Science*” (2021/in press) as powerfully addressing the core idea of human psyche and its dynamism. Highlighting within these sentences several keywords, they can be considered as pivotal terms of the whole work of last 40 years of the re-foundation of Cultural Psychology: *sign, uncertainty of living, bifurcation point, multiple possibilities, ambiguity of the future, ambivalence, invention, decision, time, meaning making, border, affective*.

The ideas of transformation, development, and dynamism have always been at the core of Valsiner’s work. He taught us this importance through two complementary movements:

- The idea of a constant transformation of the person-world system through the ways of semiotic mediation as an incessant activity that is both micro-genetic and systemic and ecological. The person in every moment is in relationship with her own context starting from processes of construction of the meaning of what she is experiencing.
- The constant dialogue of psychology with other disciplines such as literature, art, aesthetics, anthropology, religions, social sciences, education, politics, biology, theory of dynamic systems, and so on. In this way, the vision of human being is not that of a disembodied and abstract mind, or of a computational algorithm that works on rules disconnected from the context, but of an affective, aesthetic and symbols-maker subject (Valsiner, 2007, 2014a, 2020a, b, 2021/in press).

The psychic dynamism at the center of Valsiner’s conceptual system is not simply based on the idea of a cumulative growth of the mind, which—starting from less sophisticated, poor and embryonic forms—comes to take over and use the symbolic and cultural forms already available. Beyond any additive/summative logics of phase and transitive development, in the last 40 years, Valsiner’s scientific and theoretical work shows how every form of psychic development is a process of transformation of the relationship between the organism and the world that is capable of transcending the present (Gamsakhurdia, 2021). Time is the architrave of all his theory. It is not a matter of a stages, phases, or

chronological time, which is external to the subject, but it is about a time that is qualitatively connected to the experience and to the becoming (Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017). Valsiner taught us to consider time not as the a priori element of human knowledge according to Kantian memory. The time of the person is a time that on the one hand recalls Bergson and the concept of *durée* (1907), on the other hand, it is a plastic configuration endowed with meaning starting from the transformation, uncertainty, becoming and incessant flow of experience according to a semiotic perspective (Peirce, 1935).

We must admit that psychology has an unresolved problematic relationship with the temporality of experience. In many cases, time is eliminated: think of the ergodicity of the sample, which is the pre-assumed condition of stationarity and uniformity among the specimens of the sample. That constitutes a not-discussed and assumed condition, aimed at generalizing the results (for a critical review of the topic cfr.: De Luca Picione, 2015, 2020c; Salvatore & Valsiner, 2010; Tateo, 2015).

Alternatively, let us think of all those psychological perspectives that are radicalized on a hyper-simplified representation of time. If we consider human experience as a condition of pure factuality, as a state of things, as an exclusively concrete datum, we will always find ourselves adhering to some form of reductivism in which the time becomes monolithic, static, and external to experience. Let us take several examples to explain that. (A) If we focus exclusively on the importance of the past, we could risk sustaining a certain cause-effect automatism that binds rigidly the present to the causes that occurred in the past. (B) If we consider only the present as the foundation of the psyche, we could say that human experience is an exclusively contingent form dictated by the reactivity to the present stimuli. (C) If we consider only the future to be influential, we could come to believe that human experience is exclusively projected into the future to reach a state of final fulfillment of its being. The reference here is to the trivialization of idea of Aristotelian *entelechy* according to which reality already has in itself the final goal it wants to reach.

When we support or privilege only one of these three temporal scenarios as the *primum movens* of experience, we risk falling into partial and reductive visions. However, they have a certain recurring and widespread character in psychology. Just think of the impoverished deterministic vision of a certain psychoanalysis that founds the whole experience starting from the first early and childhood traumas of the past. At same way, we find an affine conceptual vision in the evolutionistic psychology, which stipulates that behaviors are adaptive form evolved during an ancestral period. Regarding reactivity in terms of stimulus–response in the present, it is easy to recall some clichés of behaviorist psychology in terms of association and conditioning. While if we exclusively welcome the idea of a psychic nature that must be realized in the future, then we hear the echo of a certain ideological creed of humanist, existential, and trans-personal psychology. There we find a propensity toward the discovery of the ‘true’ Self, the giving voice to ‘the most authentic’ part of one’s own personality, or the digging up one’s own ego to realize all potentiality that has always been possessed but still latent.

In each one of these time-windows (past, present and future)—if considered in exclusive terms—human experience is already given and determined. No space is reserved for indeterminacy, for the domain of possibilities, for transformation as the result of a sudden unexpected contingency (in terms of the bifurcation of experience).

The inestimable contribution of Jaan Valsiner lies precisely in having developed a theoretical system based on the idea that time is a central element with which human experience itself is called to confront and find solutions (not definitive, not decisive, but just transitory). The psyche is inherently temporal, not only for the becoming over time, but above all for always being on the border of the present moment between the future with

its indeterminacy and the past with its irreversibility. Time is exactly at the heart of the psyche. It is not a substantialized, entified, external, and measurable time. It is a constant and unavoidable tension between continuity and discontinuity, stability and change, subjectivity and otherness, immediacy, and mediateness (Bansal, 2021; De Luca Picione & Valsiner, 2017; De Luca Picione, 2020a, b; Simão, 2020; Valsiner, 2002).

Valsiner—by recognizing the temporal foundation—leads us to consider the psyche as a systemic (ecological and contextual), hierarchical, and transitory semiotic process in which experience is made possible through a process of semiotic mediation, namely through the interpolation of signs that with different degrees of abstraction and generalization allow to give consistency to the experience.

Semiotic Mediation: the Condition of Possibility for Experience

Semiotic mediation in the face of the transient temporal foundation of human experience offers the conditions for the possibility of thinking, feeling, acting, and constructing systems of relationships. It is thanks to the discretization operated by the signs of the flow of experience that it can become an ‘object’ of self-reflexivity, of the possibility of transformation, of intentionality, of negotiation, of mediation with others. Recalling Sebeok and Danesi (2000), semiotic mediation is at the service of experience-modeling.

According to my point of view, the issue at stake can be read from different levels but all of which are mutually complementary:

1. The dynamic tension between “stability” and “change.”
2. The relationship between “immediacy” and “mediateness of the experience.”
3. The constant ambivalence between “substance” and “relationality.”

Some considerations follow in order to clarify the previous three arguments.

1. Semiotic mediation responds to the function of offering a plastic organization of signs that works as a scaffolding for personal identity, for goal-oriented action and for the relationship with other people (Valsiner, 2005, 2014a, b). In biosemiotic terms, Hoffmeyer (2014) and Emmeche (2015) define *semiotic scaffolding* as the interlocking of a number of enabling processes of sign action unfolding at several levels of organization, focusing energy flow and agency of the system or subsystem upon a constrained repertoire of possibilities, thus guiding the system’s behavior to follow a more definite sequence of events (Favareau, 2015). In these terms scaffolding process canalizes further behavior and creates the frame for habits (Kull, 2012). As Giorgi and Bruni (2015) synthetically highlight, the semiotic scaffolding works as a process enabling living systems to gain in stability and functionality through the imposition of a number of historical constraints on the range of various possibilities made available to their responding repertoires. The scaffolding defines a quasi-stable boundary of the domain of life experience for the organism. The system of sign that is mobilized by the semiotic mediation provides a condition of “*normativity*” (a meaningful bordered frame), where the subject is waited to act in a certain way and in a certain degree of foreseeability with the environment.
2. Semiotic mediation allows us to distance the here and now of the immediacy of the flow of experience through the discretization of signs. The signs therefore act as systems of discontinuity, differentiation, and distinction capable of constructing the minimum and

indispensable forms of experience. Here, it is at stake the border as a semiotic device for organizing experience (Valsiner, 2007; De Luca Picione & Valsiner, 2017; De Luca Picione, 2017, 2020a, 2021, in press). The sign works as border that is able to create a difference, which acts primarily as a time discretization (before/after), a spatial discretization (here/there, inside/outside), and a subjective discretization (me/not-me, me/other). By acting in this way, the immediacy of the here and now is “mediated” by the signs. Here, it must be clarified that the sign does not act only in terms of representation and denotation (that is, it refers to something other than itself) but also and mainly in terms of presentation. This clarification is very relevant because it allows us to consider the sign and its articulation over time as a double and complementary intertwining of both codified, symbolic and digital forms, and of embodied and analogical forms (think for example of affective activation, the aesthetic level of experience, the ecstatic dimension, participation in the sublime, etc.) (Innis, 2020; Salvatore et al., 2021; Valsiner, 2020a, b). On the one hand, digital coding mainly marks the side of distinction/representation/distancing; on the other hand, the analogic presentation keeps the subject tied to the experience in terms of implication, participation, and subjectivity.¹

3. Semiotic mediation in the light of the two points just discussed offers simultaneously a dimension of consistency to experience (in terms of concreteness) and a dimension of relationality (in terms of construction and undoing of networks of connections between the subject and its context (De Luca Picione & Freda, 2014, 2016b; De Luca Picione, 2020a). In fact, semiotic mediation through the support of signs and their entire hierarchical articulation (experienced through the affective and aesthetic participation) provides a sense of concrete reality for the subject. The value-making function of sense-making process is at stake here. In the present time, the sign not only “represents” a state of the world, but also “is” that state of the world. However, this is not given once and for all but is only temporarily stable. Crises, thresholds, turning points, uncertainty, ambiguity and ambivalence put in motion affective activation, the need for a new balance and the dynamics of development (Di Gesù, 2021; Marsico, 2018; Dicè et al., 2021, in press). Therefore, Valsiner warns us against the risk of hypostatizing the experience. The semiotic mediation of signs is not a static form that responds in terms of representation and/or external mapping of experience. Semiotic mediation takes place on two fronts that are apparently antinomic and paradoxical: on the one hand, it provides a distancing from the here and now of experience; on the other hand, it allows us to live the present by forgetting that it is precisely by means of the signs that we are making experience (De Luca Picione, 2020b; De Luca Picione & Freda, 2014; Esposito et al., 2016).

Semiotic mediation is the embodied, affective, and aesthetic form of experience (Lordelo, 2021; Traversa, 2021). It simultaneously becomes an instrument, expression, and relational structure of experience. In semiotic mediation, the chaining of signs is never just linear but catalytic-systemic and hierarchical-intransitive² (De Luca Picione & Freda,

¹ With respect to the lack of definitive symbolic coding, Valsiner showed how the most basic levels of semiotic hierarchy are undifferentiated levels due to the affective activation of the body (Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017; Valsiner, 2014a, b). At the higher levels of semiotic organization, we find hyper-generalized signs with as-field extension and without defined boundaries.

² As Cabell & Valsiner briefly and clearly state: «Processes of semiotic self-regulation operate through temporary hierarchies of signs (Valsiner, 2001). Generalized and hypergeneralized feelings, as well as differentiated emotions—all encoded as signs—operate as parts of such hierarchy. Signs operate upon signs, and become regulators in respect to one another. The multifunctional nature of signs guarantees the emergence of flexible hierarchical systems of semiotic regulation. The move of a sign into a regulator’s role

2014; Valsiner, 2007). I mean that the flow of signs that instantiate the person's experience feeds back on itself (i.e., the sign that follows defines the meaning of those that precede) and organizes a quasi-stable hierarchy in the present time based on habitus, but open to the uncertainty of the future in situations of bifurcation, crisis, and catastrophe (De Luca Picione & Freda, 2016c; Freda et al., 2016; Tschimoto, 2021).

The Three Universal Tenets of the Human Psyche: *Normativity, Liminality, Resistance*

In the chapter “Cultural Psychologies and New General Psychology” (2020), Valsiner elaborates a synthesis of the questions just above treated by identifying three universal principles of the human psyche: *normativity, liminality, and resistance*.

Normativity indicates the “need” for people to define what is lawful, what is possible, what is expected to be done and what is forbidden. Normativity provides an oriented field that contributes to mean the experience. Normativity provides the development in terms of human values of the scaffolding process of semiotic mediation. Valsiner believes the entire human development is normatively set up within the societal framework in ways that set up expectations for the life course (Valsiner, 2021/in press). The social normativity of the prescribed life course is set by social rituals that truncate the ongoing flow of living into qualitatively different segments. Social norms function through meanings—semiotic mediators—that regulate their functioning. Normativity is not a golden cage of values, but an essential condition to allow the expression of the experience. This principle implies the need to consider the importance of values and morals in psychology in their capacity as psychic organizers and guidance systems (Valsiner et al., 2016). Therefore, their scaffolding function is at the same time affective, cognitive, relational, and behavioral. Each crisis requires the reconstruction of a form of regulatory stability that renegotiates the regulatory system with others (Martino & Freda, 2016; Martino et al., 2019a, b; Uriko, 2021; Xu & Wu, 2021).

With respect to liminality, I consider this principle of the human psyche exactly as the flip side of normativity. Reduced to a minimum, there is a temporal liminality (between the past already given and the future yet to come) and spatial liminality (between the inside and the outside of the person). Liminality is a universal and normal condition for all biological open systems. The human psychic open system is enriched with self-reflection and self-intentionality so that the factual and concrete plane of experience (“WHAT-IS”) is continuously compared and connected with that of uncertainty (“WHAT-IF”) and with that of becoming over time (“WHAT-IS-NOT-YET—but *could become to be*”). Through self-reflexivity and self-intentionality, the liminality of the

Footnote 2 (continued)

creates the minimal case of a hierarchical dynamic system of semiotic regulators—a superior sign regulates its underlying process. Thus, the person's self-awareness “I am angry” leads to constraining of the primary feeling field. The hierarchy of semiotic regulation is dynamic—a constructed regulator can immediately be superseded by another level of hierarchical semiotic regulation. Thus, the person who has just entered the regulation of the primary field through the labeling of anger, can generate yet another sign of higher generality that regulates the use of that emotion label—“it is UNFAIR for me to be ANGRY”. The regulation by signs includes—recursively—constraining (enabling) the generation of a super-ordinate organizer from the field of possible signs. We may encounter potentially ever-increasing and ever-generalizing growth of the semiotic regulatory system» (Cabell & Valsiner, 2011, p.101).

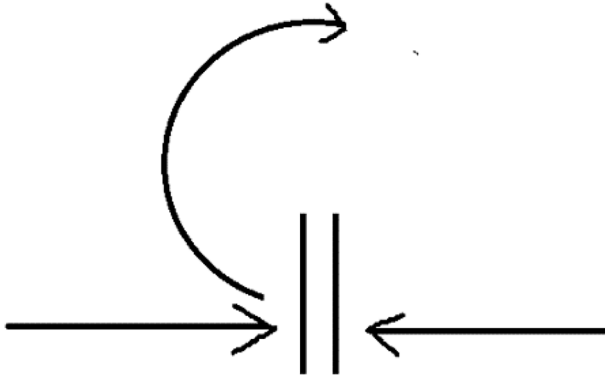


Fig. 1 The directionality of sensemaking, the counter-action and the result of the result of a third direction

human being constantly takes the form of a tension between the “BEING-HERE” and the “WAITING-TO-BE-NON-HERE.”

Finally, through the third general principle of resistance, Valsiner shows how human experience is capable of configuring itself across borders that oppose an inherent “counteractive force” to human action itself. Human action is always endowed with directionality, which focuses and directs the movement of action. This directionality takes on the value of desire (“I-WANT-X”) or of reluctance/unwillingness/avoidance (“I-DO-NOT-WANT-X”).

The central point is that it is precisely the resistance that is placed on such directionality that produces an innovative effect of creation. In fact, Valsiner argues that the imagination is the result of the semiotic development in the border area, this happens when the movement towards X encounters a block, which by opposing a counter-movement prevents its continuity. The effect is that a third direction Y is forced to emerge starting by the tension of the two forces (Fig. 1).

Starting from Kurt Lewin’s idea of *topological psychology* and *boundary* (1936) and the use of Meinong’s notion of *Gegenstand* (1960), Valsiner elaborates the model of the “*Triple Gegenstand*” which can be considered as the minimum structural unit of psyche. It is made up of three necessarily connected moments: (1) the intentional movement A in the direction of a boundary; (2) the counter-movement B which maintains the border; (3) reflection/folding of the first movement A on the second movement B (Fig. 2). In synthesis, the *Triple Gegenstand* is constituted of a threefold entanglement of the action on itself: goal-oriented action, resistance to the action, and reflection upon action (Valsiner, 2018).

It is very interesting here to observe that we go far beyond the phenomenological notion of “intentionality” of the psyche (that is, the thought always has a content that instantiates it), which always risks being too static and fixed. In order to “work,” the psyche constantly requires opposition, tension, and resistance. The triadic structures of the *Gegenstands* of the human psyche are inherently dynamic (Valsiner, 2014b). They emerge, function, and are reorganized. Starting from the block, resistance, and tension along a border, the world is enriched with possible new versions, unpredictable outcomes from the start, innovative solutions, and creative imagination (Tateo, 2013).

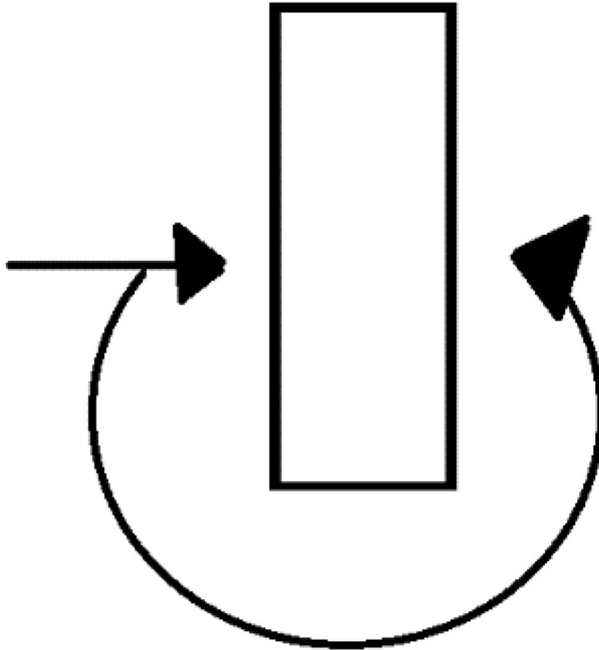


Fig. 2 The triple Gegenstand: the manifold unity of the psyche

The Semiotic Model of the Modal Articulation: a Theoretical Development with a Valsinerian Core

In light of the arguments and principles outlined above, one question remains central. If semiotic mediation represents an embodied interface that instantiates experience in present time making it an object of agency, self-reflection, self-intentionality, and a system of relations, then this implies that signs cannot be just things that indicate, name, and represent, that is, they do not exercise an exclusive function of labeling, naming or predicating.

There must be a system of signs that “meta-organizes” the present experience in terms of the immediate future. In order for this structure to be dynamic and constantly plastic, indissolubly connected in terms of self-referentiality with the subject, but also relatively stable in the course of action, there are signs with particular functions that Valsiner calls “stem concepts”: I AM, I NEED, I WANT, I WILL (Valsiner, 2014a, b, p. 18) (for a further discussion of stem concepts, c.f. Carriere, 2021, in press).

Recognizing Valsiner’s insistence on the relevance of this question, in the last 10 years, I have been involved in developing a semiotic model that I have defined “modal articulation process” (De Luca Picione et al., 2017, 2018, 2019; De Luca Picione, 2020a, b, c; De Luca Picione et al., 2015; De Luca Picione, 2019).

By this notion, I mean the way in which the processes of construction of the meaning of one’s experience are mediated by the modal categories of *necessity* (duty, obligation, prescription but also prohibition, interdiction, limits), *possibility* (ability, resource, opportunity, power, but also constraints, resistance), *will* (desire, hope, wish but also avoidance, deflection), *knowledge* (certainty, trust, belief, but also hypothesis, doubt, uncertainty, etc.).

There is a long tradition in logics and philosophy regarding the use of the modal categories. By modal articulation, I do not mean a use of a logical type that shuns contradiction or falsity. I mean a sensemaking process starting from dynamic/affective/agentive relationships between people and contexts.

In primis, I note that the use of these modal categories allows the person to separate from the purely referential level of experience and to carry out subjectively and culturally meaningful processes of sensemaking by expanding the degrees of potentiality and dynamism of semiotic mediation. In fact, modal operators are considered “predicates of predicates” (Marscaini & Zinna, 1991), that is, they do not act at a semantic level (i.e., the contents) but at a syntactic level preceding the verb of the action and indicating the way in which that action is about to be carried out by the subject (according to obligation / compulsion, will / desire, with permission / potential / ability, etc.).

I summarized the process of modal articulation according to three functions: (1) the function of *connection* between affects and signification; (2) the function of *mediation* between subjectivity and otherness; (3) the function of *vectorization* in temporally orienting the action.

The modal articulation allows a dynamic focus on sensemaking processes in terms of affective, identity, relational, and agentive construction. The notion of modal articulation moves flexibly between different degrees of plasticity at the extremes of which we have a rigid and not very plastic form or fragmentation/pulverization of the processes of sensemaking of one’s experience.

Function of Connection of the Modal Articulation

Every experience always has an unavoidable emotional matrix, rooted in the activation of the body (Innis, 2020; Salvatore et al., 2021; Valsiner, 2020a, b, 2021). Here, I mean affectivity as a primary process of symbolizing the context, starting from simpler and more primitive thymic bodily forms, such as pleasure/displeasure, good/bad, etc. up to more articulated, complex, sophisticated, linguistically and culturally connoted forms (De Luca Picione, 2020a; Valsiner & De Luca Picione, 2017). That is, affectivity constructs a symbolic-relational embodied context that functions as the primary organizer of the form and quality of the relationship, giving directionality to the sensemaking process (De Luca Picione & Freda, 2014, 2016a, b; Salvatore, 2016; Salvatore & Freda, 2011). At this level, affective activation allows modal categories to emerge directly and pre-reflexively as an expression of the subjective body matrix itself.

Already in the generative semiotics of Greimas (1983), modal values are considered as the emergence of subjectivity and closely linked to the *passionate* nature of experience. Here we find a defined modal chain of steps that transforms “the being” in terms of competence to perform an action. Furthermore, in Weizsäcker (1956), the modal categories are defined *pathic* (from Greek “pathos,” i.e., suffering) for their affective content and define the movement that the subject feels in modal terms (duty, necessity, will, opportunity, capacity) in the face of experience of crisis (subject-environment rupture).

Function of Mediation of the Modal Articulation

Through the relationship with otherness, the subject experiences herself and shapes the trajectory of action in the world. Taking up Harré’s notion of *positioning* (Harré & van Langenhove, 1991), it is possible to observe how the modal articulation is able to perform

an intersubjective mediation function, namely, it creates a multi-composite configuration of modal attributions of the ways in which relationships with others are shaped and intertwined. In this sense, the modal articulation helps to specify the positioning assumed by the subject in relation to other social actors, in regulatory, affective, cognitive, agentive and performative terms.

The definition in cultural and normative terms of rights and duties as well as their social negotiation is a dynamic process of a pure modal nature. The person builds and mobilizes a wide normative modal repertoire (but always contextually realized and possible to be changed), inasmuch her intersubjective positionings are defined by obligations/permits, constraints/resources, necessity/possibility, obedience/opposition, desire/resistance. We find here clearly the normative dimension of the psyche highlighted by Valsiner, which is organized in the specific context in intersubjective terms, both mutually and complementarily.

Vectorization Function of the Modal Articulation

The flexible emergence of modal categories in the sensemaking process allows for the articulation of multiple connections between the agent, the action and the context in a dynamic temporal movement.

For Greimas (1983), Weizsäcker (1956), Valsiner (2014a), Coquet (2005), modal operators connect the sense of action with the subjective flow of time.

As we have seen, people in their processes of transformation and development are struggling with a margin of uncertainty due to constant changes and unpredictability.

The unbridgeable distance between the presumed plane of facts (ideally knowable and referenceable “states of world”), the contingency of events, their irreversibility and the process of human sensemaking is the basis of the agentive dynamism oriented towards hypothetical and expected future scenarios (Valsiner, 2014a; De Luca Picione et al., 2018; Salvatore et al., 2021). The semiotic capacity of person—by modal categories—presents a radical innovation, that is, it can guide and orient the subject’s action over time in a dynamic, flexible, plastic and innovative way through different contexts of interaction and experience. In fact, sensemaking processes allow us to transcend the present through the aid of symbolic devices and to signify our own experience and action, through the perspective of a future scenario or explanatory hypotheses about the past. Imagination process emerges here in a modal articulation between MUST/CAN/WILL semiotic operators.

Conclusions: the Dynamism of Valsiner’s Psyche in Terms of a Semiotic Process of Modal Articulation

Valsiner leads us to consider the psyche as a semiotic, dynamic, affective/embodied system in a liminal position of continuous tension on the border between “what has already been” and “what is not yet.”

Thinking of the psyche as a border system and not as a content or as an entity has fundamental implications. The psyche develops and works as a relational system that uses signs to translate immediate experience (i.e., semiotic mediation). The translation in an “on line” context of life must be not only of a semantic kind but also agentive, pragmatic and future-oriented. This process must also have several dynamic junction points between the plane of expression and that of subjectivity. The emergence of signs

that convey modal values (MUST, CAN, WANT, WILL) provides a dynamic structure that is affective, subjective, relational and agentive (Carriere, 2013, 2021).

I decided to use the name of “modal articulation” to convey the idea of a process and continuous regulation between the different modal operators. In fact, the choice of one does not exclude the consideration of others, but also implies all other modalities. The use of a modal category does not imply the exclusion of the others, but there is a play in which all the others are dialectically involved.

Starting from Valsiner’s scientific work on the dynamic nature of the psyche, I developed the notion of modal articulation to address the following main aspects:

- The modal articulation refers to the emergence of an emotional/affective and agentive subjectivity within a contextual relational system.
- The functions of modal articulation processes are essentially of *connection* (affects and sensemaking), of *mediation* (normative development of intersubjectivity), and of *vectorization* (direction of action).
- The modal articulation fluctuates and varies over time, but above all it is itself inherently linked to the temporal characteristics of human experience.
- The modal articulation always shows itself as a *modal composition* (Bertrand, 2002). In fact, the use of a specific modal category in the sensemaking process implies the involvement of other modal categories. For example, the notion of possibility presupposes the notion of necessity, which in turn implies the idea of obligation or duty, which refer to the will and then to the power. However, this cycle has an opening character that responds to contextual and local contingencies. This leads us to believe that there is no absolute modal syntagmatic chain, but that from time to time we have modal configurations with local normativity (De Luca Picione et al., 2018, 2019).
- The modal articulation has a gradual and dimensional character in its transformative processes. In other words, we do not have a rigid and formal use of modal categories in sensemaking processes, but always an idiosyncratic, local and temporary use, culturally connoted.
- The extreme forms of modalization are too rigid or too fragmented/disorganized. Both appear to be a source of discomfort for the person who loses her ability to relate to the environment in terms of development and construction.

Thinking about the three Valsinerian principles of *normativity*, *liminality*, and *resistance*, the semiotic model of modal articulation allows us to avoid slipping into the *impasse* of too rigid and univocal psychological models, where, for example, people are defined mono-modally:

- (a) Through their immediate response to needs and stimuli (strictly evolutionary, behavioral and/or neurophysiological hypotheses) (“Impersonal necessity in biological terms”)
- (b) In rigidly normative-culturalist ways (“people would do exactly what their cultural system prescribes”) (“I must”)
- (c) Through only solipsistic and intrapsychic desire (“I want”)
- (d) In terms of rational and disembodied computation processes of the advantage/disadvantage in taking an action (“I know”)
- (e) In terms of absolute confidence in one’s abilities and resources (“I can”)

The modal articulation as a psychological construct does not focus on a single modal category at a time, but on the interactive dynamics of the subject in a intersubjective context, in terms of “*feeling, thinking, and acting*” in view of the temporary and transitory forms of meaning that can allow the experience.

As a personal tribute to Jaan Valsiner, I presented my way of developing the three psychic principles of normativity, liminality and resistance through my modal articulation model.

I consider the 2021 as a great year for the cultural psychology. We can gratefully celebrate Jaan Valsiner’s 70th birthday with his last milestone “New General Psychology: foundation for a Science.” There is an infinite source of inspiration and hope for the future.

Happy birthday Jaan and thank you for all!

Sincerely,

Raffaele.

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