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Co-constructionism* and development: A socio-historic tradition

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The term «co-constructionism» is becoming increasingly used in contemporary developmental psychology. Its major function is to unify two conceptual domains– constructionism and sociogeneticism –that have been habitually viewed as if they were irreconcilable opposites. Despite respectable history within psychology and many contemporary tendencies to move psychology in the social constructivist and discursive directions, most of the critical problems of co-constructionist theoretical system remain hostages either to the common language uses of psychologists, or to the methods-dominated imperatives for «empirical research» practices. Co-constructionism as a general orientation may make it possible for psychologists to create novel methodologies that might take into account the open-systemic nature of development.
Key words: *Constructionism, Sociogenesis, Epistemology, Development*

El término «co-construccionismo» aparece citado cada vez con más frecuencia en los trabajos actuales de psicología del desarollo. Su principal función es unificar dos dominios conceptuales –construccionismo y sociogénesis– considerados habitualmente opuestos e irreconciliables. A pesar de los esfuerzos de orientar la psicología hacia una dirección constructivista o discursiva, esfuerzos que pueden encontrarse a lo largo de la historia de la psicología y también actualmente, la mayoría de los problemas críticos del sistema teórico co-construccionista permanecen cautivos del lenguaje común usado por los psicólogos y de los imperativos metodológicos dominantes en las prácticas de investigación em-

* Nota Ed. El término «constructionism» se suele utilizar dentro de una tradición psicológica que enfatiza la dimensión social del proceso de construcción. Hemos respetado dicho término en el texto de Valsiner, pero hemos optado por el término más general y usual de «*constructivism*» (constructivismo en castellano) en el resto del monográfico. De todas formas la partícula «co» del término «co-constructivismo» remite con toda claridad al elemento social y compartido del proceso constructivo.

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pírica. El co-construccionismo, entendido como una orientación general, puede contribuir a que los psicólogos creen nuevas metodologías que puedan tener en cuenta la naturaleza sistémica y abierta del desarrollo.

Palabras clave: *Construccionismo, sociogénesis, epistemología, desarrollo.*

Introduction: why talk about *co*-construction?

Contemporary developmental psychology has been divided by two basic oppositional ideas, which lead to the emergence of the use of labels like «co-constructionism» . First, there exists the opposition between assuming that the psychological functions are given entities –in contrast with the idea that these functions are constructed by the organisms in the course of their lives. This is an ontological assumption, from which the notion of constructionism emerges as its opposite solution. Thus, in genetic epistemology we start from this solution and axiomatically claim that psychological functions are constructed, rather than pre-existing entities. The emphasis here is the *axiomatic* statement about the *origin* of these functions and the *nature of their operation*, since from the viewpoint of their current existence both viewpoints coincide. The very same observable process of a child's solving of a puzzle can be interpreted as the child's *construction* of a solution (from the constructivist point of view), or the child's *finding* a solution (i.e., under the assumption of the solution existing already –a non-constructivist view).

Secondly, the ways in which psychological functions exist entail the opposition of individual versus social (inter-individual) basis. The two folk models of person <–> society relationship that are widespread in lay thinking (both unidirectional: person impacting upon society, society impacting upon person) have successfully guided the thinking of social scientists. If such folk models appear in the set of basic assumptions of a science, then they will maintain the activities of scientists in the range of possible ideas that stem from these models. Both of these models have served as an obstacle to psychology's conceptualization of *mutuality* of the relation between persons and society. Most of psychological concepts that may begin from phenomena of mutuality as described intuitively (e.g., the concept of «bonding» or «attachment» –which entail reference to a relationship) are translated in psychology's theoretical ands methodological realms into entitities that either «belong to» the person, or environment (e.g., the notion of «attachment» has become translated into an empirically determinable property of the child –typified by the A-B-C classification of children's attachment, or of the adult –with the original emphasis on a relationship irreversibly lost in the translation process).

It is here that the notion of co-construction makes it possible to unite the individual-locatedness of psychological functions and their social origins. The idea of social origins is not antithetical to the notion of personal construction, and instead of attempting to distinguish between «the social» and «the personal»

within the psyche, co-constructionist thought is oriented towards finding ways how to conceptualize these sides together– in systemic interdependence. Human psychological functions are personal in their current state, yet social in their origins, and interdependent with their social environment in order to maintain themselves. The form of such interdependence may be highly flexible (thus enhancing persons' adaptational possibilities to new environments). It is exactly the question of *how to conceptualize that dynamic form of interdependence* that constitutes a most difficult theoretical problem in psychology. Mere claims that such interdependence exists amount to well-meaning word-magic of psychologists, and are no solution for the problem.

Following from such general understanding it is not surprising that from a co-constructionist viewpoint (Wozniak, 1986, 1993; Youniss, 1987), human development is characterized by *joint construction* (from here the term *co-construction*) of the psychological system of the developing person by him/herself, and the goal-oriented «social others» who provide the person with social suggestions (Valsiner, 1994a). Psychological development is constructed in the person's relating with the environment, under the social guidance of the «social others» . This three-part analytic unit –consisting of *constructing* person, *structured* environment, and *purposive* social others– obviously sets the co-constructionist framework up to be easily viewed as vague or all too general to be of empirical utility. However, the latter idea –empirical utility– is an artifact of social construction of psychology as empiricistic domain of activities. In contrast, in science general terms are often of sufficient vagueness (Löwy, 1992). The actual conceptual problem of co-constructionist thought is in the *dynamic purposiveness* of the interdependent human actors within the three-part unit, and in the *multi-functional organization* of the environment. Both the constructing person and the purposive «social others» are at any moment capable of changing their goal-orientations, hence making any three-part unit of analysis a dynamic system of potentially high fluidity. The latter is easily visible from the outside as vagueness, yet it is exactly in that fluidity where adaptational value of the co-constructing unit lies.

Games of labels

Most of theoretical argumentation in contemporary psychology is a form of semiotic game, where new general labels are constantly being invented and attached to complex phenomena of either real (i.e., lay understanding of psychological issues) or socially constructed kinds (e.g., terminology linked with the meanings of scores on standardized psychological tests). As a result, psychological theorizing suffers from connotations that laypersons' language use «smuggles into» the scientific language use of psychologists. The result of such clandestine guidance of a science by its object phenomena is twofold. First, the given science becomes *pseudo-empirical in its research activities,* as Smedslund has been consistently pointing out (Smedslund, 1978, 1994). Secondly, the *theoretical discourse of the science becomes a certain re-definition game*, in which the self-representation of the discipline (in terms of the label «scientific progress»)

is consensually constructed via re-labelling previously unclear complex phenomena by new terms. Thus, by re-labelling «ideas» into «cognitions», or «reflex complexes» into «neural networks» (as well as inventing new labels like «cognitive science»), theoretical argumentation in psychology guarantees itself its *status quo*, while claiming to be undergoing yet another conceptual «revolution» (e.g., «cognitive» or «ecological» revolution).

Similar dangers of label games face our contemporary talk about co-constructionism (Valsiner, 1994c). Surely a new label cannot avoid being put into previously existing social practices of the given discipline. Nevertheless, there can be value in using new terms –these can serve as conceptual means to protect the theoretical discourse from entering into one of the well-traversed and unproductive trajectories of thought. Thus, introduction of a new label «co-constructionism» allows us to overcome the habits of unproductive conceptual fights between proponents of «individualistic» (e.g., Piaget's) or «sociocentric» (e.g., Vygotsky's) theoretical efforts. It is clear that such fights are social constructions of oppositions, based on original theoretical constructions where there was merely a different focus or emphasis between the authors (see Piaget, 1995; Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991). The ardent followers of the original authors may easily build a narrative of a heroic battle between the original authors (cf. Valsiner, 1994d –on narratives in psychology), thus taking upon themselves the role of the active fighters for the «cause» of the original authors. The original authors –who may be no longer alive when these battlefield narratives are constructed– may have disagreed with one another about their perspectives, yet for them crusades against one another need not have been a productive intellectual pastime. For the sake of constructing knowledge about psychological issues *per se*, it may be important to ignore most of the «battlefield-narrative» kinds of reconstructions of events in history of psychology, and concentrate on the history of ideas by particular authors within psychology. Thus, thinking about the «grand battlefield» of «behaviourism» with «introspectionism» in the U.S. in this Century may guide us to dismiss the ideas of some individual scientists who are classified (usually by others) to belong into one or another of the «camps», while in reality they were merely trying to construct a reasonable (to them) account of some psychological phenomena. It is therefore not surprising that careful analyses of the history of specific idea systems reveal both superfluous classifications of the complex authors (e.g., see the case of Vygotsky in Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991), or forgetting of their contributions (see the case of Stern –Kreppner, 1992). In other terms –construction of psychology's histories is itself an example of co-constructionist process.

Co-constructionist unification of sociogenetic and personological viewpoints

The constructivist notion entails a focus on the active constructive role that the developing person plays in relation to its environment, and via it –in developing oneself. Novel psychological functions which emerge in the process of relating to the world are both constructed outcomes, and functional organizers of

that process. Different proponents of the constructivist perspective may have different solutions to the philosophical problem of the link between our subjective world and that of the external objective one. Some may deny the presence of the latter (thus reaching a standpoint of subjective idealism), others may recognize it in one or another form. Nevertheless, the unifying conceptual link between the constructivist perspectives is the belief that the developing person actively constructs something (e.g., knowledge, new relations with the world, concepts, etc.) that is novel for the person, and functional in the further development of the person in some ways.

Sociogenetic theorists built their focus on the social foundations of individual psychological phenomena on the phenomenology of issues of social influences that puzzled the European societies in the 19th Century (Gauld, 1992, Janet, 1925 chapter 4). The sociogenetic line of thought has had to fight off the temptations of social reductionism in its core. These temptations originate in the identification of relevance with a deterministic connotation –any declaration of the *relevant role* of the social world for the developing person can easily become interpreted as the former's *determinate* «effect» upon the latter (e.g., the society can be viewed as «molding» or «shaping» persons). Furthermore, the existing explanatory terminology in developmental psychology is largely limited to unidirectional accounts of development (e.g., «teaching» *versus* «learning» , the latter *versus* «maturation»), and overlooks the systemic complexity of the developmental process (van Geert, 1988).

The unpredictable nature of the process of development is a consequence of the teleogenetic nature of the process on the one hand, and of the open-systemic (canalized) nature of all development, on the other. At any moment in the ongoing transaction, any participant can, at an instant if necessary, change his or her goal orientation, or strategies of conduct, thus leading the whole co-construction process to take a previously unexpected and unpredictable direction (Winegar, 1988). The result is a theoretically granted impossibility to adhere to the traditions of «prediction and control of behavior» that have been advocated to be the goal of scientific psychology by some traditions over its history.

Metatheoretical foundations: Unidirectional and Bidirectional Culture Transmission Models

There are two main models of culture transmission that have underlied the thought about human development. Historically, the unidirectional model has dominated the discourse in psychology, education, anthropology, as well as in our everyday life. Nevertheless, it will be shown that the reality of human development is different, as it involves the unity of active constructivity of all generations involved in cultural transmission.

The *unidirectional* notion of culture transmission (Valsiner, 1989, chapter 3) considers the recipient of the cultural transmission or socialization passive in his acceptance (or failure of it –a «miss» or an «error» of the transmission) of

the cultural messages. The recipient's role is merely either to accept the messages aimed at him, or perhaps fail to do so –but in any case the recipients are not assumed to re-organize the received message. The messages are *de facto* viewed as fixed entities– which are either accepted by the receiver as such, or (in case of their incomplete acceptance) an «error of transmission» is assumed to have taken place. In any case, the role of the recipient of these messages is that of the mere accepter of all the «influences», rather than that of a constructive (albeit limited) modifier of those.

The unidirectional culture transmission model is deeply rooted in our common sense. It fits with the nature of technological systems, where the information to be transmitted is fixed, and where the accuracy of transmission of the given message is a desired goal. In contrast, development of any kind and level (biological, psychological, sociological) is an open-systemic phenomenon in which novelty *is constantly in the process of being constructed.* Hence to think of culture transmission as a «handover» of «object» –like «messages» is not consistent with the constructivist viewpoint.

In contrast to the unidirectional culture transmission model, its counterpart –the *bidirectional* culture transmission model is based on the premise that all participants in the cultural transmission process are actively transforming the cultural messages– the communicator actively assembles a message of a certain unique form, and the receiver (equally actively) analyzes the message, and re-assembles the «incoming cultural information» in a personally novel form in the mind. This view of cultural transmission entails construction of novelty *both* during encoding and decoding of the cultural messages. In some sense, the «message» as such never exists in any «given» form, as it is reconstructed by the encoder (who may start with a certain goal in mind, but shift it while creating the message), and by the decoder in a similar manner.

Implications from the bi-directional model. The main implication of this active-constructive role of the recipient is in the *possibility* for emergence of compensatory processes (whenever necessary), and thus –multiplicity of ways in which the encoded message is being reconstructed. Thus, if the current cultural «input» is reduced in its «intensity» of social suggestion, the developing person can complement that absence by way of personal construction of a self-control device that guides the person in the socially desirable action direction. Or, when the personal-constructive complementary process is inactive, some intense social suggestion from the «others» can perform the same function. In this way, the bidirectional culture transmission model makes it possible to conceptualize the *redundant nature* of development. Each developing psychological function is redundantly controlled by the constructing person, and by the actions (or environmental setups) of the «social others» . If one of those control mechanisms becomes temporarily disfunctional, the other takes over. Human psychological functions are *overdetermined* (Boesch, 1991; Obeyesekere, 1990), rather than optimally organized.

Centrality of the personal experience in development. The bidirectional model of cultural transmission makes it possible to take an open-ended perspec-

tive to the sociogenetic process, which is appropriate if we are interested in the construction of novelty. The person's subjective world is a central venue in the reconstruction of culture. This restoration of the centrality of human personal experience reconciles the personalistic and sociogenetic perspectives in psychology, which traditionally have been viewed as distinctly separate and mutually oppositional.

It is also obvious that the bidirectional culture transmission model is of greater generality value, than its unidirectional counterpart. The latter constitutes a special case of the bidirectional model –namely, the case in which the active role of the receiver of the cultural messages is reduced to its minimum. Under those conditions, the person can –actively– take the role of «passive recipient» of cultural messages. This entails direct acceptance of those messages as givens, without modifications- while this role is being used to channel one's relation to the messages. Active construction of the role of «passive recipient» is itself a constructive act. The bidirectional model thus incorporates the unidirectional one, whereas the reverse is not possible.

Historical foundations of co-constructionist thought

The co-constructionist line in theory building may look a current novelty, but that is merely an illusion based on our lack of understanding of the history of psychology. All the major sociogenetic thinkers of the past were *de facto* advocating some version of co-constructionist thought. It is only by forcing their contributions to the artificial limiting categories of «cognitive» or «social» emphases (or into «introspectionism» versus «behaviorism» versus «cognitivism») that the co-constructionist flavour of their work tends to become overlooked.

Features of co-constructivist theorizing that have been relevant in the history of the social sciences are manifold. Thus, Frederic Bartlett's work constitutes one of the first empirical demonstrations of the co-constructivist process (Rosa, 1993). Muzafer Sherif's classic studies in how social norms are jointly constructed in social group settings constitute another empirical elaboration of the co-constructivist ideas (Sherif, 1936). A number of issues of our present-day co-constructivist theorizing were antedated by C. Lloyd Morgan (1892), George Herbert Mead (1912, 1913) and Georg Simmel (1908). A major role of the originator of the co-constructivist thought belongs to James Mark Baldwin (Valsiner, 1994b), whose impact upon the work of both Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky was profound. It is in the work of Vygotsky that we find the emphasis on the joint construction of psychological phenomena by the experiencing person and the «social other».

Lev Vygotsky: dialectical synthesis of personal experiences and culture

Vygotsky's life and thought has recently become a target of intense scrutiny (Kozulin, 1990; Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991). Most of the interest in

Vygotsky's heritage and its glorification has been mediated by the sociogenetic interests in contemporary psychology and education, hence the person-centeredness of his approach has been de-emphasized. However, it is the recognition of exactly that facet in Vygotsky's general theoretical scheme which is of relevance in the context of the present paper.

The central concept in Vygotsky's sociogenetic theory is interiorisation, or internalization (Lawrence and Valsiner, 1993; Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991). The developing person actively transforms inter-personal experience into novel (intra-personal) form, using sign systems. The central feature of Vygotsky's thought –semiotic mediation of human psychological functions– is present in both inter-personal and intra-personal worlds. Hence the dual but interdependent existence of the personal and social worlds not merely exists, but is accentuated in the course of development. In this focus, Vygotsky followed the lead of James Mark Baldwin, and developed it in close parallel with William Stern's ideas (Kreppner, 1992). Similarity between Vygotsky's and George Mead's construction of internalization has been analyzed elsewhere (Valsiner and Van der Veer, in press).

The issue of intra-personal (i.e., internalized) semiotic functioning led Vygotsky to be interested in the development of forms and contents in the reasoning processes of children. One of the specific domains that was investigated quite actively in Vygotsky's lifetime was the issue of concept formation (Vygotsky, 1934 chapters 5, 6, 7). Vygotsky viewed the process of concept formation as the establishment of mastery over the flow of person's own psychological processes (Vygotsky, 1931, p. 244) by way of functional uses of signs within the personality. In the transition from childhood to adolescence, qualitatively new forms of sign use (thinking with the help of concepts) emerges in ontogeny, although the previous forms (thinking in complexes) do not vanish from use.

The role of generalization. For Vygotsky, the issue of ontogenetic and microgenetic transitions between lower (forms of «complexes») and higher («concepts») forms of semiotic functioning was of central relevance. (Vygotsky, 1931, p. 250). The development of reasoning from «thinking in complexes» to «thinking in concepts» is characterized by the unification and abstracting generalization of the multiplicity of relations, arriving at a general abstract feature that unites the objects in the given set. This generalizing process is close to Werner's (1957) orthogenetic principle, where by way of hierarchical integration the more general organizer of a system provides unification of the semi-structured previous state of the structure.

The process of differentiation and hierarchical integration in the process of moving from complexes to concepts was viewed by Vygotsky to entail an important transitional form –that of pseudo-concept. This is a form of reasoning that at the outside looks like concept (i.e., seems organized by an abstract, unitary relation between objects), but in reality is still a complex (i.e., entails multitude of relations between objects –Vygotsky, 1931, p. 256). For example, in an experimental setting a child selects from all available materials all triangles –this operation could be accomplished on the basis of a generalized «idea

of triangle» (in which case it represents reasoning with the help of concept), but exactly the same practical result can be obtained on the basis of a myriad of associative ties between the similar-looking objects (triangles), without any use of generalization (i.e., reasoning on the basis of a complex). It is this uncertainty of the pseudo-concept that makes it open for further development. Human communication is made possible through the fuzzy nature of the signs used at any moment. This fuzzyness amounts to most concepts used being pseudoconcepts, which are responsible for setting up the assumption of intersubjectivity.

In terms of the development of a child's reasoning processes, it is in the domain of pseudo-concepts where the more- and less-differentiated semiotic encodings of the world (those of the adult, and child) meet. Vygotsky emphasized the illusionary similarity of the pseudo-concept and the «real» concept (e.g., «pseudo-concept is as much similar to the real concept as the whale to a fish»). Developmentally speaking, the pseudo-concept is no longer a complex, and not yet a concept, but a transitional form in the process of reasoning. This is most evident in the period of «crisis of adolescence» –when the adolescent uses words functionally as concepts, while at the same time still defines them in terms of complexes (Vygotsky, 1931, p. 283). The main task for psychology of adolescence was viewed by Vygotsky to be in the tracing of the making of the personal meaningful world by way of constructive internalization.

Meaning and sense in play and fantasy. The role of play and fantasy is central for human development, as viewed by Vygotsky (1931; 1933/1966). In the play of preschool-age children, and in the fantasy world of older children, adolescents, and adults, the persons go beyond their present level of development, and create their own personal «zone of proximal development» (Valsiner and Van der Veer, 1993). Much (but not all) of that personal construction of the future takes place within interaction with other human beings, and even in the solitary action contexts the construction of one's intra-psychological future is assisted by the cultural organization of the context. Still, the locus for intra-mental construction remains within the personal subjective world, however closely it is interdependent with the social world with which it is «independently dependent» (Winegar, Renninger, and Valsiner, 1989).

Through play (and fantasy), the person can transcend the immediately available (directly perceivable) world, by way of semiotic reconstruction of its meaningfulness. The play receives input from two sources –from the immediate (perceivable) world, and from the semiotically encoded world of the meanings of words which can be linked with the present situation. By way of semiotic encoding, the world becomes meaningful and senseful. In his emphasis on the dynamic interplay of cultural meanings and personal senses, Vygotsky outlined the meaning («*znachenie*») and sense («*smysl*») distinction:

> A word's sense is the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as a result of the word. Sense is dynamic, fluid, and complex formation which has several zones that vary in their stability. Meaning is only one of these zo-

> nes of the sense that the word acquires in the context of speech. It is *the most* stable, unified, and precise of these zones. In different contexts, a word's sense changes. In contrast, meaning is a *comparatively* fixed and stable point, one that remains constant with all the changes of the word's sense that are associated with its use in various contexts. Change in the word's sense is a basic factor in the semantic analysis of speech. *The actual meaning of the word is inconstant.* In one operation, the word emerges with one meaning; in another, another is acquired... Isolated in the lexicon, the word has only one meaning. However, *this meaning is nothing more than a potential that can only be realized in living speech*, and *in living speech meaning is only a cornerstone in the edifice of sense.* (Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 275-276; emphasis added; original Vygotsky, 1934, p. 305)

Vygotsky set up the meaning ⇔ sense relationship in dynamic terms –both are changing entities, but their change is different in the time frame (i.e., sense is constantly changing, while meaning is «comparatively» fixed, but yet dynamically changing). The relatively slower rate of changing the meaning is obtained by inserting the previous meaning into a novel speech context (realizing the potential of the meaning by turning it into the «actual meaning»). It is in play and fantasy that the developing person creates an extension of one's personal past life experience to the future direction of goal-oriented development. Furthermore, through fantasy and play the current meanings are constantly being challenged by the active person, rendering efforts to think of meanings in static terms contradictory to the process of construction of new meanings.

Contemporary theoretical approaches: co-constructionism and cultural psychologies

It is in the 1980s that different groups of investigators have re-entered the field of culture-linked psychological issues. The orientation towards bringing different notions of culture back into psychology can be observed widely (e.g., Bourdieu, 1973, 1985; Boesch, 1983, 1991; Eckensberger, 1979, 1995; Hermans and Kempen, 1995; Kon, 1988; Krewer, 1992; Moscovici, 1982, 1988; Ratner, 1991; del Río and Álvarez, 1990, 1992; Rogoff, 1990; Tulviste, 1991). A number of these efforts of building «cultural psychologies» can also qualify as co-constructionist perspectives.

Person and society according to Richard Shweder

Shweder stems from North-American cultural anthropology to use the diversity between cultures and persons to create a new discourse, primarily to fit with the current historically developing needs of the U.S. society. In his discourse about cultural psychology, Shweder recognized both the heterogeneity and culture-inclusiveness of moral reasoning by human beings (Shweder and Much, 1987; Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller, 1987). This complex mosaic of persons

who live within their cultural worlds, who are inconsistent from one context to another (and still demonstrate cross-situational continuities), and who hold strong and unalterable personal opinions (e.g., Shweder and Much, 1987, pp. 235-244) which are «seamlessly» related to the culture –all that requires a fresh theoretical view on issues raised in psychology, anthropology, and linguistics. The result was the growing need for the talk in terms of a discipline that integrates culture and person. Shweder makes an effort to explain cultural psychology's aims as «...to imaginatively conceive of subject-dependent objects (intentional worlds) and object-dependent subjects (intentional persons) interpenetrating each other's identities or setting the conditions for each other's existence and development, while jointly undergoing change through social interaction...» (Shweder, 1990, p. 25). The personal minds (object-dependent persons) construct mental and affective order out of chaos of everyday events –hence, an illusory view of reality is constructed by persons, but on the basis of the culture (Shweder, 1980, p. 77).

The closeness of Shweder's kind of cultural psychology to the co-constructivist perspective is based on the understanding of personal agency in the middle of culturally organized meaning-filled flow of events in persons' everyday lives. That latter flow is affect-ladden, operating on the basis of implicit meanings that guide persons' actions in a given episode (Shweder, 1995). The developing child is not being given an extended message of clear content, but a highly ambiguous one –upon which the child needs to act reflectively (within the reasoning possibilities of his present developmental state), and to construct his own understanding.

James Wertsch's activity-situated polyphonic theory of the mind

Wertsch's theory construction has proceeded a long way since the late 1970s, starting from the Vygotskian notion of semiotic mediation (Wertsch, 1979, 1983) on the one hand, and the activity theoretic perspective on the other (Wertsch, 1981). Wertsch has emphasized the dynamic process of situation redefinition as the primary means by which persons involved in joint activity context guide one another's development. Interaction partners are constantly in some relation of intersubjectivity (sharing similar situation definition), which they transcend by the process of situation redefinition (Wertsch, 1984, pp. 7-13). Communication about the situation definition (and redefinition) takes place by semiotic means, and the structure of the activities involved guides that communication (Wertsch, Minick and Arns, 1984).

The activity-framing remains in the background of Wertsch's accounts, but now the main focus becomes the level of utterance as appropriate for analysis. Furthermore, Wertsch appropriates Bakhtin's emphasis on dialogicality and makes it work in his system, where the analysis of «voices» affords the revealing of complexity of messages (Wertsch, 1990, 1991). The result is a consistent return to the study of ambivalences embedded in communicative messages –in the form of «polyphony of voices» or «heteroglossia» (Wertsch, 1985, pp. 62-68). Different «voices» can be seen in the utterances in ways that «interanimate» or dominate each other in the act of speaking in situated activity contexts (Wertsch, 1995).

Michael Cole's activity-mediation in co-construction

Cole's version of cultural psychology emerges from his studies of cultural tools (e.g., Scribner and Cole, 1981; Newman, Griffin and Cole, 1989), paired with an explicit interest in the historical nature of cultural processes (see Cole, 1990). His theoretical construction is based on the «cultural practice theory» (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition –LCHC, 1983). The main mechanism by which culture and person are related is that of «mutual interweaving» (or «intermingling of threads from two ropes» –those of biological «modules» and cultural contexts– Cole, 1992, p. 26). This interweaving reflects the general process in which «...the culture becomes individual and the individuals create their culture» (LCHC, 1983, p. 349) –or, in other terms, the culture and mind are «mutually constituted» (Cole, 1995).

Gananath Obeyesekere's «work of culture»

Obeyesekere has been working within a psychoanalytic paradigm, diligently trying to reformulate its conceptual structure on the basis of empirical evidence from the Sinhalese cultural contexts (Obeyesekere, 1963, 1968, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1981, 1984, 1990), but also through a thorough look at encounters between cultures (Obeyesekere, 1993). His psychodynamic theory is built around the notion of the *work of culture* –the psychodynamic process at the intersection of personal and cultural worlds, which through objectification and subjectification leads to the re-definition of the person's self in culturally appropriate ways (Obeyesekere, 1990, p. 68).

Obeyesekere has been emphasizing the unity of the personal and cultural symbols in the lives of persons. Personal symbols are cultural symbols (Obeyesekere, 1985, p. 637)– and the usual exclusive separation of «private» and «public» symbols that has been implied in occidental anthropology makes it impossible to study their relations. Cultural constraints set up conditions under which personal symbolic action takes place –be this the construction of women's pregancy cravings in Sri Lanka (Obeyesekere, 1963, 1985) or sorcery for retribution (Obeyesekere, 1975). On the other hand, each person acts in one's unique ways, has unique personal history, and hence any «standard ritual» needs to accommodate a variety of specific conditions that may be characteristic of a particular person. Obeyesekere uses the terms of *objectification* and *subjectification* as complementary processes that link the personal and cultural symbolic worlds (Obeyesekere, 1981, pp. 136-137). New kinds of encounters may be introduced by new social practices (e.g., proliferation of a religion previously unknown in the culture), which may lead to the construction of a projective system of ideas –constructed by persons in collective ways, projecting upon the the world (Obeyesekere, 1984, p. 481).

A central place in this constructive process is given to subjective imagery. Subjective imagery, insofar as it is based on objective culture, has the potential for group acceptance, unlike fantasy or totally innovative acts, which have no prior

cultural underpinnings. (Obeyesekere, 1984, pp. 169-170). The person co-constructs culture via one's subjective imagery and its inter-personal legitimization.

To summarize, the primary relevance for human development is located in the culture, with the role of persons relative to the culture described in different terminologies (e.g., «seamless linkage» or «appropriation» , or «mutual constitution»). All these terminological devices are in need for further analysis and theoretical construction of the general processes by which the persons <–> culture relations are organized. Persons are conceptualized as active –they change their worlds by acting upon these, and themselves as a result. The developing person is in the middle of such heterogeneous world, and constructs one's own psychological organization on its basis. It is the general perspective of co-constructivist theorizing within which answers to questions of how such construction takes place.

Unity of subjectivity and intersubjectivity in co-constructionist thought

At a first glance, the relationship between subjectivity and intersubjectivity may be a question that resembles a projective inkblot, to which proponents of both person-centered phenomenological and sociocentric world views easily project their pet ideas. However, the question of the nature of the subjective worlds and their interdependence with the socially organized living is at the heart of both understanding subjectivity and society.

The central characteristic of *inter*subjectivity is the inderdependent relation between the *subjectivities* involved in the shared activity (and of codes of communication). It is the persons who, on the basis of their (life)-historically constructed personal cultures at the given moment enter into communication with each other. Human beings endure (in Bergson's sense –Valsiner, 1994c) the uncertainty that the entrance into communication entails by way of creating the «as-if» kind image of intersubjectivity, which is pre-structured by the social roles that the participants carry or construct in the process of communication. Even when alone, the person creates an «as if» version of reflection of the world that operates as a practical, productive «error» (Vaihinger, 1920, p. 165) in the process of forward-oriented pre-adaptation to the next momentary context. Development is based upon such «as if» kind apperception, or in other terms –by creating such «practical errors» the organism participates in one's own development.

Ontologically, some form of subjectivity has to be presumed in order to make sense of intersubjectivity. When persons (with their subjectivities) enter into communication with one another, the actual form of intersubjectivity is being constructed by transcending the «private worlds». Intersubjectivity is thus a meta-process (secondary to the dialogic process *per se*) of reflexivity that operates in irreversible time, constantly leading to creating, maintaining, and changing of the persons' sense-backgrounds of the (foreground) dialogical activity. This is another way to make sense of it as situation redefinition process (Wertsch, 1991). The important aspect of this process is that it belongs to the

persons' subjectivities: it entails monitoring the other persons' presumed communicative action plans from the vantage point of the given person. That process itself is co-constructive in its nature –the person acts «as if» the other(s) are oriented in way x in the dialogue, monitors the actual acts of the others (x'), and modifies the «as if» determination in accordance with x' or by one's own momentary intention (i.e., by another personally constructed «as if» state).

The heterogeneity of intersubjectivity is based on the social roles that the intersubjectivity-constructor assumes. These roles are normatively asymmetric, both in their embeddedness in the social structure, and in the dynamic flow of dialogues. The static and dynamic foci upon intersubjectivity become encoded in the distinction of different kinds of intersubjectivity. Markova (1994) distinguishes the «as-if» and «strived-for» kinds of intersubjectivity, and recognizes the tension between those. The former sets up the (static and imaginary) perspective that intersubjectivity already exists (i.e., constitutes an ontological postulate), whereas the other entails the process of the actual construction of mutual understanding in irreversible time.

Semiotic mediation and irreversible time

It is the active participant in a dialogue who gives rise to novel reorganization of both the subjectivity and intersubjectivity. The person is in parallel involved both in external and internal dialogues, which feed into each other to allow for the making of personal sense through semiotic mediation. Semiotic mediation is a way to subjectively transcend the present participation within a context. Semiotic constructivity is thus viewed as future-oriented construction of subjectively meaningful possibilities (which may, but need not, become actualized). By taking this stand upon semiotic mediation as a process of personal future-oriented construction, the issue of intersubjectivity acquires a new flavour. The centrality of person's subjectivity is restored to the recognized embeddedness of the person in the processes of intersubjectivity.

It is the subjectivity that (once it has emerged in development) feeds forward to further development of acting and thinking, via semiotic construction. This pre-adapting feature of human psychology is constructive, it produces a variety of subjective phenomena at any present time, that are geared towards creating always uncertain future present-times. As has been pointed out elsewhere (Valsiner and Van der Veer, 1993), the concept of «zone of proximal development» has been a semiotic tool for developmental psychologists to try to conceptualize this process. Semiotic means allow for local decontextualizing practices (Linell, 1992) in the flow of inter-mental and intra-mental discourses. The process of local decontextualization itself is context-bound.

Culture can be viewed as an organizational form that functions as a canalizer (set of constraints that direct –but do not precisely determine) of the next state of human conduct. The co-constructivist perspective on human development is based on the general view on development by way of the principle of «bounded indeterminacy» (Valsiner, 1987). By the use of constraining as a process that ena-

bles construction of novelty (Winegar, 1988; Winegar, Renninger and Valsiner, 1989), it is possible to explain the directionality of development, while retaining the open-systemic notion of unpredictability of the exact outcomes.

Joint construction in asymmetric relationships

The focus on co-construction entails reconstruction of hierarchical organization within structures. Within developmental psychology, the emphasis on differentiation (and its reverse process –de-differentiation) of structure has played a prominent role most of the time (Werner, 1957). The differentiation process takes place on the previous site of structuration, and leads the organism towards another structural state, which, like all the previous ones, is only relatively stable and fully dependent on the organism's relations with the environment.

Differentiation entails the notion of *hierarchical integration* (Werner, 1957) of the novelty that the recipient of the message assemblies. In the domain of semiotic mediation (*à la* Vygotsky), that integration takes the form of abstracting generalization. Through the use of signs human beings can construct generalized hierarchies of feelings and thought that transcend the given context, with all of its set of social suggestions. Thus, personal construction of generalization is the vehicle for the co-constructionist process always to transcend any particular context. In a curious twist, this possibility for abstractive generalization buffers the developing person against social «influences» embedded in the given context. In other terms, hierarchical integration of personal experience in semiotic ways may be triggered by the context, but (in its transcendance of the context) proves the centrality of individual constructionism in the social world (Piaget, 1995).

Hierarchical organization is not only characteristic of the intrapsychological world of the person, it is equally relevant in the inter-psychological social relations with others. Most social relationships within which co-construction takes place are hierarchical in their nature, starting from the dominance relationships in dyadic encounters as well as small groups, and ending with complicated hierarchies of social roles in the context of social institutions. The social world is not that of persons equal in their power relations. Instead, it is organized hierarchically into asymmetric power relationships of varied longevity.

Hence the relations between the communicator and the recipient are usually not those of equal partners. Instead, we can observe the normal hierarchical organization of power relations between the participants, where asymmetric distribution of roles is the norm and the symmetric one an exception. In terms of cultural transmission, the generation of parents is always in *de facto* dominance position over their children, even if the parents construct a notion that they are either equal to their children, or subdominant to them. For example, no matter how much European or American middle class parents pretend that their children are «equal partners» in their culturally organized everyday activities, this stance is itself a culturally co-constructed ideology, which organizes not only the self-reflections by the parents, but also those of the investigators of the social development process.

In a more general vein, the hierarchical organization of interpersonal relations leads to the issue of the nature of communication process. How would the notions of shared communicative codes (or «intersubjectivity») fit with the asymmetric relations between the participants in the process of communication? From the viewpoint of the bidirectional model, the first socially co-constructed image is that of «sharing» in inter-personal relations. Actually, co-construction processes take place within inter-personally differentially meaningful environment. The human environment is made meaningful by the symbolizing activity of the human beings, who treat their environment *as if it were* «shared». This assumption of sharing helps us to jointly construct ways to overcome our misunderstandings (Robinson, 1988). Human ontogeny of adult-child relationships is built on the joint construction of semiotic devices that allow the young child not only to understand the cultural world, but to participate in its reorganization.

General Conclusions: Co-constructionism demystified

There is no grand story to tell about co-constructionism. It is a label that covers a variety of theoretical orientations, each of which tries to take into account the personal constructionist view on human psychological development on the one hand, and its ontogenetic bases in the social lives of people, on the other. Heuristically, it is a framework that should allow the thinkers to overcome the perennial «person» versus «society» dichotomy. However, that heuristic function of the framework can be viewed to be realized in a number of specific theoretical terminologies of particular authors. It is the particular ways in which authors construct their specific theoretical explanations that are of interest for a serious investigator, and not the inclusion (or exclusion) of different approaches in (from) boundaries of «co-constructionism» as a new class label.

A central focus of the co-constructionist perspective is on the meanings (and personal sense) –constructing goal-oriented person, who acts within meaningfully structured environment, interactively with the purposive impacts from other persons. This three-part «unit of analysis» can be described in terms of structure of the given action context where the physical aspects of the structure are specified by their meanings, and upon which the goal-oriented actions of the personal sense-making individual and the guidance of «social others» is mapped. The particular unit of analysis needs to retain its temporal structure, since it is only through consideration of time that the co-construction process can be explicated. Obviously, this line of construction of methodology is continuous with the constructionist emphases (the «clinical method» of Janet, Piaget, and Vygotsky), and bears resemblance to the efforts of contemporary discourse analysis (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Shi-Xu, 1995). However, stringent mathematical formalization of such dynamic three-part units is not yet in sight in psychology, which continues to reduce the notion of mathematical precision to socially conventionalized used of the statistical world view. In the latter, psychology may have reached its historical *impasse*. Co-constructionist theoretical system cannot

build its methodology on the latter, hence a careful return to the genetic epistemology of Piaget and sociogenetic epistemologies of Vygotsky, Mead, and Baldwin may lead us to the formalization of developmental logic that would fit the co-constructionist theoretical system (Herbst, 1995, Valsiner, 1995). The intellectual productivity of a newly labelled orientation like co-constructionism depends upon its internal conceptual coherence, rather than its evaluation within the systems of social conventions of psychologists.

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