

An Invitation to Cultural Psychology

Jaan Valsiner



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
Singapore | Washington DC

Introduction

Why *Cultural Psychology*? Making the human condition meaningful

This book is about how we—human beings—make ourselves, and our world. We do so through being compulsive meaning-makers—whatever we encounter in our lives we need to *make sense of*, rather than only *react to* or *act upon*. Or even more precisely, as we *react to* and *act upon* the world in the middle of which we live, we construct it as *meaningful for ourselves*. And it is that meaningful way of living that is central to us.

Furthermore, our efforts are possible since this meaning construction habit has itself emerged as the major feature of our being a species—*Homo sapiens*—that can reflect upon others, and upon itself. Such self-reflexivity emerges from relating with other species in the long course of anthropogenesis, and, once in place, completely changes the ways in which these newly self-reflexive animals act within their life-worlds. They begin to decorate their bodies and their caves, they start to use some objects around them to act upon fellow human beings and change the physical environment. They start to irrationally trust officials in uniforms, and to feel proud if they put on such uniforms themselves, or—at least—check the current time from their Rolex wristwatches.

As a species we have found ways to start acting purposefully—focused on some goal orientations that face the future. As an example, human beings are the only species that buries their dead—together with a variety of objects that are expected to be of use in whatever location the departed souls may arrive. After hundreds of thousands of years, human beings started to encode their understandings of the world in various marks they make on the walls of special places—cave or church walls—or not so special places, like drawing on walls of buildings in some strange conglomerates in which they live, called villages or towns. They start to write—to keep track of their exchanges with others, the taxes they owe to the local ruler, or write notes to persuade others about what might be the right (or wrong) faith. Eventually, they begin to record their reflections upon their lives, their wisdoms, and

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their rules of governing one another. Scribes, lawyers, and journalists become professions many aspire towards.

Among such writings emerge temporarily relevant objects of a flexible substance—paper—in the form of newspapers, magazines, collected works by political leaders, etc., all of which can be preserved or demolished. Paper decays and can be burnt, sometimes as a public spectacle. The burning of “dangerous” books has recurred in human history. Things on paper can also be cherished and maintained—over centuries at times. Paper accounts are less solid than those on clay tablets, but much more so than computer files. Last, but not least, the human fascination with meaning-making makes it possible to create accounts of the human ways of feeling and thinking itself—and of the use of all the history of such reflexivity. A book on cultural psychology—like the present one—is itself an example of our quest for meaning-making.

WHAT IS IT ALL ABOUT?

Cultural psychology is about human bodies as they are culturally presented by the forward-oriented persons who are one with these bodies. No other species has invented ways of changing the color of one’s hair, or skin, or of making differences in the color of these or ways of covering the body into an object of constant action. Such cultural making of the body—and the person—emerges, subsides, and disappears. It is replaced by new ways of similar kind.

In contrast with other animals, humans have special ways of treating their bodies. When the bodies emerge—from other bodies via birth—they enter a world made meaningful by their creators—other human bodies who are attached to the emerged minds. These minds make the making of new bodies meaningful—it is not the body of a mere “offspring” who is being born, but that of a *child*, a *boy* or a *girl*, or of “my daughter” or “my son”. The body of the born child is transformed into a human being by immediately being treated as if it is a meaningful and meaning-making agent. It is decorated with amulets to keep away “the evil eye” or to show off the parents’ love for the child or their riches, it is trained how a human being should sleep, eat, eliminate, and interact with others. The body is covered or uncovered—depending upon circumstances—by different wrappings—clothing.

Clothing may come in layers, may be decorated by patterns considered ‘beautiful’ (or ‘ugly’; see also Chapter 10), may be censored as to what is appropriate for boys/men or girls/women, and covers different parts of the body with different functionality. Penis sheaths and high-heel shoes differ in their function from trousers, skirts, and sandals. So

do hats and baseball caps. Wearing pants may be offensive to the public mores,¹ as can not wearing any clothing at all in public. Human beings have taken their meaning-making out of their minds to the things that surround the body—from swaddling it to the construction of meaningful environments in which to live. They construct passageways in the forest, houses in the villages, and new cement jungles in the form of towns. They build up minarets and church towers to guide the ordinary people inhabiting their huts or apartments towards the celestial powers that are assumed to be “up there” beyond the clouds. Their curiosity of exploring the others in other places leads them to build ships and space stations. Yet in the center of it is the living human body that is actively exploring one’s world, trying to do the impossible—go beyond the horizon—moving the particular limits of one’s experience further and further.

Even when the bodies cease to exist they are wrapped into meanings. Human beings have invented funeral rites—to send off the soon-to-be-decaying bodies to places not known to the still living. The invention of such places is important for the ones who are still alive, and who are involved in the making of more of the meaningful bodies. The latter would follow their makers in their makings—always slightly new, yet continuous with the past. Creating innovations is the main tradition of the human ways of living.

So, in the beginning, and in the end, there was (and is) the body. The word emerges through the body, and re-organizes the body drastically. It is the realm of these re-organization processes that cultural psychology studies—as a *science* of the human ways of being. It is a science—striving towards generalized knowledge which is inevitably based on the uniqueness of each individual case. It is focused on *the human ways* of living their lives—rather than those of rats, elephants, or spiders. It is at the very root of the science of psychology—a result of the 19th century thought about human languages and differences between ways of living in different parts of the world.

Yet in its contemporary version it is very new. This book is an invitation to think creatively both of what is old and what is new.

CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: A NEW CHANCE FOR THE STUDY OF HUMAN PSYCHOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY

Cultural psychology—the new emergent sub-field of psychology—has been on the rise since the 1990s (Cole, 1996). It has a chance to capture that part of the human *psyche* that other areas of psychology have

¹For example, a young woman in Sudan is convicted for wearing pants in public (Fadlalla, 2013).

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purposefully avoided—the higher mental functions. The latter entail intentionality, goal-directedness, and flexibility in adjusting to the world—and adjusting the world to oneself. Their world is made into a socio-moral world through their actions (Brinkmann, 2006). The result is dramatic—human beings both adore and kill one another under the aegis of invented general “truths” and imperatives. They sacrifice their lives to gods, kings, and governments. *Homo sapiens* has made itself into a *theatrical* species. No other species has reached that kind of state in their development.

What I do in the rest of this book is to chart possible new ways in which science—not psychology as it is, but science well developed in contemporary biology, chemistry, robotics, and anthropology—can innovate the methodological realm of psychology. Culture, if brought back into psychology and given a role in the *psyche*, leads to radical innovation in a number of classic assumptions in psychology: the notion of “experimenter’s control” over the phenomenon under study, the stability of phenomena (and non-interference from the study), and the role of common sense in psychological theorizing. The field for innovations is wide open, but constructing meaningful canons for science on that field is not a simple matter. Only by the end of this book can anybody decide in which ways the effort has failed, or—maybe—even succeeded. Meanwhile the chapters in this book are meant to trigger new ideas in directions not anticipated by the author. This book is thus—through a look at cultural psychology—a vehicle for self-discoveries by the readers.