

Concerning the Importance of Ontological Issues for Cultural Psychology: a Reply to Comments

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Abstract The paper continues the “ontological” discussion in IBPS, addressing the question of the importance of ontological issues for contemporary development of cultural psychology. The language psychological science speaks is considered as an ontological issue and a most topical one for cultural psychology, aiming at “constructing a psychology that is universal while being culture-inclusive” (Valsiner 2009, p.2). Ontological issues could stay implicit and neglected, as long as the ‘etant, “the mode of being”, “the particularities” were discussed within the circle of adherents of one and the same school, who implicitly had in mind the same ‘entre. However, as soon as the discussion involves representatives of different schools, ontological issues become crucial for mutual understanding and *meanings* of the words have to be explicated. Same *words* like “psyche”, “subjectivity”, “social”, “culture”, etc., – often mean different *things* when they are pronounced or written by representatives of different theoretical trends. The discussion of the ‘etant without clear indicating of the ‘entre under consideration is likely to turn into a Babel. Global modernity requires constant efforts and insistent desire for mutual understanding across the diversified global scientific community. Thus, creative collaboration in epistemological developments has to ground on clear comprehension of the ontological stances of the debaters.

Keywords Ontology · Conceptual apparatus · Language of science · Global science · Cultural psychology

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“When one mixes up the epistemological problem with the ontological one by introducing into psychology not the whole argumentation but its final results, this leads to the distortion of both”

Lev Vygotsky

Introduction

Gilberto Perez-Campos in his paper (Pérez-Campos 2017), which is continuing the ongoing “ontological” discussion in IBPS, turns up the question of the importance of ontological issues for contemporary development of cultural psychology. I would like to comment on this very important topic.

The prospects for the development of psychological science as a whole and of any of its branches can hardly be assessed and evaluated without considering the general context of contemporary development of society and civilization. A key characteristic of the modernity is the formation of a new cultural reality of the “global” society. Progressing globalization in economics, politics, social and cultural processes alongside with the inextricably related tendencies of counter globalization (often leading to large-scale conflicts and increasing terrorist threat) brings forward great changes in social reality, in the lives of all kinds of communities all over the world, challenging psychological science and social sciences in general. The importance and depth of the changes of human existence which occurred in the last decades remains underestimated by psychologists, although in the general context of social sciences and humanities it has been largely discussed since 1990s (Adkins and Lury 2009; Beck 2000; Beck and Sznaider 2006; Lash 2009; Urry 2003). The scale of the changes is so great that the applicability of classical psychological theories to considering contemporary humans is caused to question.

The scientific community is facing a double-fold challenge. On one side, we have to face the new reality of the globalizing world as the subject of our investigation. On the other side, cross-cultural interaction is an important aspect in the contemporary science development and in the way of life of the contemporary scientific community. This makes the role of cultural psychology particularly important and brings to the light new challenges, which cultural psychology has to realize and to take, aiming at “constructing a psychology that is universal while being culture-inclusive” (Valsiner 2009, p.2). A most important challenge relates to the language psychological science speaks. Strange as it might seem, I believe this is an ontological issue today and a most topical one.

The Language We Speak – A Tool for Mutual Understanding

Psychology is a mass profession in this new global multicultural world. Psychologists are moving across the universe today, from country to country, from continent to continent in the course of their professional education and carrier. This demands general standards of psychological education and practices. Psychological science, once broken up into parts in the course of the so-called methodological crisis, now has to ensure mutual understanding of representatives of different schools.

Meanwhile, the “traditional” diversity of psychological science has not decreased. On the contrary, it has multiplied in the last decades, in the course of the formation of the global science, relevant to the current developments in culture and civilization, which pose a serious challenge to the modern mainstream, traditionally dominated by the so-called “Western” schools. Understanding of the global world demands full and profound integration of the “local” academic traditions and separate systems of social and humanitarian knowledge, marked by cultural specificity. As Danziger foresaw in his largely cited article: “In a sense, modern psychology is returning to the position from which it began: a polycentric position in which there are diverse but intercommunicating centers of psychological work that reflect a diversity of local conditions and traditions” (Danziger 1994, p. 477).

Nowadays we are witnessing a fundamentally new entity appearing - a polycentric global psychological science, which is global both in terms of its object and its subject, and which presents a fundamentally new platform for psychological research and development that meets the needs of the new global reality. The growth of new scientific centers reflects in scientific production. The statistics of the issue of scientific journals in psychology, indexed by Scopus, show, that the share of journals published in the North American region from 2000 to 2015 fell from 55 to 44% of all published in the world, while the total share of Eastern Europe and Latin America rose more than thrice: from 2% to 7.

The interaction of schools in contemporary global psychological science can well be viewed as cross- cultural interaction. Psychological science is and has always been not only and entirely “objective” and “systematic”, but also basing on “subjectivity”. Human subjectivity is culturally biased, so, psychological theories ground on implicit beliefs about human nature, rooted in culture. Psychological theories and approaches are culturally biased. In this respect, psychological schools can be assessed as certain cultures.

As has repeatedly been noted in the literature (Castro and Lafuente 2007; Marsella 2012; Rose 2008), twentieth-century mainstream psychology developed basing on assessments of personality of a human belonging to contemporary Western culture. These psychological characteristics acquired the status of universality in the mainstream psychology. This position undermines the relevance of psychological theoretical models and the practical implications derived from those, for contemporary reality, highly complex, and unstable, as sociologists argue. That is why Jaan Valsiner claims: “Contemporary psychology is global in ways that no longer can any country’s socio-political world view dominate the field. Such international equality of contributions grants innovation of the core of the discipline, and safeguards it against assuming any single cultural myth-story as the axiomatic basis for the discipline” (Valsiner 2009, p.1). Under these circumstances, should the search for the novel theoretical, methodological and ethical foundations for the fruitful cooperation between various “local” and “mainstream” scholarly traditions and systems of knowledge on the international scale not be the honorable mission for cultural psychology?

Thereby, should the necessity to promote mutual understanding not be treated as a most important thing?

To promote that, a discussion in contemporary psychology requires explication of exact meanings of the concepts we use, because mixing of elements of conceptual apparatus used by representatives of different schools in psychology is fraught with mutual

misunderstanding. Cultural psychology can make a valuable contribution to this issue, as “To speak about culture is to speak about meaning” as Carlos Cornejo noted (Cornejo 2007, p. 253).

Situation was different before 1970-s. Psychology developing *as a science*, not being a mass profession then, could preserve the state of the so-called methodological crisis: after the initial “crisis” discussions of 1910–1920-s, different theoretical schools were elaborating their own discourses within the community of their own adherents just ignoring other “denominations”. In that period within the discourses of different schools, many things concerning conceptual apparatus used, exact meanings of the words said, were just taken for granted, needed no explication, and got none. Meanwhile the content of the concepts used by different schools was getting more and more diverse.

This is how Vygotsky described it in “The Historical Meaning of The Crisis in Psychology”: “Any concrete phenomenon is completely inexhaustible and infinite in its separate features. We must always search in the phenomenon what makes it a scientific fact What is most common to all phenomena studied by psychology, what makes the most diverse phenomena into psychological facts – from salivation in a dog to the enjoyment of a tragedy, what do the ravings of a madman and the rigorous computations of the mathematician share? Traditional psychology answers: what they have in common is that they are all psychological phenomena, which are non-spatial and can only be perceived by the experiencing subject himself. Reflexology answers: what they share is that all these phenomena are facts of behaviour, correlative activity, reflexes, response actions of the organism. Psychoanalysts answer: common to all these facts, the most basic factor which unites them is the unconscious which is their basis. For general psychology the three answers mean, respectively, that it is a science of (1) the mental and its properties; or (2) behaviour; or (3) the unconscious... Any fact which is expressed in each of these three systems will, in turn, acquire three completely different forms. To be more precise, there will be three different forms of a single fact. To be even more precise, there will be three different facts. And as the science moves forward and gathers facts, we will successively get three different generalizations, three different laws, three different classifications, three different systems – three individual sciences which, the more successfully they develop, the more remote they will be from each other and from the common fact that unites them. Shortly after beginning, they will already be forced to select different facts, and this very choice of facts will already determine the fate of the science as it continues.... At present psychoanalysis, behaviourism, and subjective psychology are already operating not only with different concepts, but with different facts as well. Facts such as the Oedipus complex, indisputable and real for psychoanalysts, simply do not exist for other psychologists...” (Vygotsky 1927).

The Language We Speak – A Tool for Comprehension

Vygotsky claims: “When one mixes up the epistemological problem with the ontological one by introducing into psychology not the whole argumentation but its final results, this leads to the distortion of both” (Vygotsky 1927).

When we use a part of conceptual apparatus of a particular theory beyond its own discourse, such clarification is necessary, not to let the discussion turn into a Babel. To

ensure mutual understanding now we have to consider *the whole argumentation*, explicating the *facts* in its basics.

Scientific analysis begins with mapping the object, the part of reality under consideration. Then comes the apparatus, theory and method, and finally the resulting theoretical model is proposed, capable to account for known already qualities of the object and to predict qualities, unknown before. For “normal” sciences, mapping the object is not a problem, because their field is objective reality. When zoologists discuss cows, there is hardly any doubt or disagreement concerning what they mean by “cow”. They all obviously mean the same creature, the same ‘entre (the being), though diverse theoretical interpretations of its ‘etant (mode of being) might follow. Same counts for linguistics, history of arts, etc.

For psychology, this turns to be different, as we have seen already from Vygotsky’s text. Between the mapping of the object and its scientific analysis, a great problem wedged oneself: to determine the subject. It is this problem, which turns out to be central for ontological aspects of a psychological theory. This issue might stay ignored and implicit as long as the discussion took place within one theoretical discourse, but in the context of the multi paradigmatic contemporary psychological science this has to be explicated and taken into account. That is why I cannot agree with Hroar Klempe (Klempe 2015) in his stating that ontological issues are not an essential part of psychological science. Neither I can agree with Simão, that “Ontological questions ask about the nature of the being, while psychological questions ask about the modes of the existence of beings, entities. In such understanding, ontology regards universal aspects of the human being, while psychology regards the particularity of the living persons.” (Simão 2016, p. 569).

Ontological issues can stay implicit and neglected, as long as the ‘etant, “the mode of being”, “the particularities” are discussed within the circle of adherents of one and the same school, which implicitly have in mind the same ‘entre. However, as soon as the discussion becomes wider, involving representatives of different schools, ontological issues become crucial for mutual understanding and comprehension and have to be explicated. Otherwise the discussion of the ‘etant without indicating the ‘entre under consideration can hardly be of any sense. Often happens that same *words* like “psyche”, “subjectivity”, “social”, “culture”, etc., – mean different *things* when are pronounces or written by representatives of different theoretical trends, and this has to be explicated.

Discussing the Perez-Campos’ Paper

The extensive paper by Perez-Campos (Pérez-Campos 2017) presents a comparative analysis of ontological discourses in theoretical papers rather divergent in relation to their methodological roots. Meanwhile, any concept used in science is part of an integrate apparatus of a conceptual system, related to a certain theoretical system. For proper understanding, a concept has to be considered in the context of the conceptual system as a whole. Torn apart from the context, an element loses its meaning.

Perez-Campos uses the word “culture” 53 times in his paper. He dwells upon different texts on culture and different theoretical interpretations of culture. However, are these texts and interpretations about the same *thing*? Same part of reality? Same

‘entre? The *entity*, which is supposed to be assessed and interpreted, which is named “culture” in those texts - is it the same?

The author gives no operating definition of culture, no explication of what he means by that word.

The excellent paper by Gustav Jahoda (Jahoda 2012) clearly shows the diversity of the possible interpretations of the word “culture” in contemporary literature, moreover, the incompatibility of several interpretations. Some definitions relate the term “culture” to social surroundings, some – to inner psychic processes.

In the Perez-Campos’ extensive paper just two definitions of culture are cited:

- “We shall call culture all that, in the public domain of a society, goes beyond that which is simply functional and instrumental in the operation of that society and all that introduces an invisible –or, better, an unperceivable– dimension invested or ‘cathected’ in a positive way by the individuals of that society. In other words, culture concerns all that, in this society, pertains to the imaginary *stricto sensu*, to the poetic imaginary, in as much as this imaginary dimension is embodied in works and in patterns of behavior that go beyond the functional” - by Castoriadis (Castoriadis 1997, p. 339–40);
- “Culture is, then, a dynamic symbolic field formed in action, which can transform and be transformed by the subject’s action” - by Simão (Simão 2016).

Castoriadis’ definition is pointing at the subject field he is considering. One cannot but see, that the author takes into consideration rather a restricted part of the latter, in comparison, say, with mostly used “classical” definition by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor: “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (Tylor 1871). Or in comparison with another popular definition from contemporary literature: “Culture is defined as a social domain that emphasizes the practices, discourses and material expressions, which, over time, express the continuities and discontinuities of social meaning of a life held in common.” (James et al. 2015).

The part of reality, which Castoriadis is considering is narrower, and the definition is closer to the mundane definition of culture (like “high” culture), than to the Tylors’, which includes f.ex., bipedal locomotion and proficiency in using a cup for drinking and a spoon for eating, as “capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Nothing wrong in that! It’s OK! As long as the author defines his subject, his ‘entre, we know what his theoretical reasoning is about, and we will not dispute the latter grounding on inappropriate understanding of the former.

The cited Simão’ definition presents a theoretical model. From Perez-Campos paper we can only guess, what the part of reality, which she is assessing, is. What the ‘entre of this ‘etant is. However, it seems highly unlikely that the ‘entre is the same, that Castoriadis is talking about, and which includes works of art and other material entities. Even less likely, that it is the thing Tylor described.

To compliment to this diversity, I would note, that in the RAT, which is also discussed in the Perez-Campos’ paper, the notion of culture means more or less the same what Tylor meant.

In the Mammen and Mironenko paper (Mammen and Mironenko 2015) we tried to put very clearly the basic assumptions on which AT builds and without which proper

understanding of the AT context is hardly possible, and to explicate meanings of concepts which were used. Firstly, we gave a detailed definition of what is called “psyche” in the context of the AT, i.e. what is considered the subject field of psychology, doing this by pointing to where lies the border between animate and inanimate matter. This issue we do not consider trivial, since, as we have shown already (Mammen and Mironenko 2015 p. 688–689), there are very different interpretations in psychology, building on different *subject* specifications and leading to different theoretical models.

AT builds on the assumption, which goes back to Aristotle (and is not a procreation of the Russian AT, as Perez-Campos attributes to us saying (Pérez-Campos 2017), that it is the living organisms, capable of moving, which should be considered animated. Psyche backbone function is to serve the free movement of the individual (the subject) in the surrounding world, where the subject is actively seeking something, what he needs or what he wants, interacting with the world around him.

Thus, it is worth being noted that the adequacy of the application of the “social ontology” by Schatzki (Schatzki 2015), suggested by Perez-Campos, seems highly doubtful in respect to the AT. The interaction of the active subject with a passive inanimate object, for example, the acquisition and absorption of food, should be considered the initial form of activity in the context of the AT. The conditions listed in our paper (p. 686) and cited by Perez-Campos in no way imply that objects are necessarily “social”.

The Mammen and Mironenko (2015) article is focused on the ontological nature of the *psyche in general*, and according to the logic of the Activity Theory, the human psyche is considered here as a specific form. Issue of culture was not in the focus of our paper. That is why there is a “lack of explicit ontological reflection on culture” in Mammen and Mironenko paper, as Perez-Campos rightly notes. The Mammen and Mironenko paper mainly built on Leontiev theory in relation to the Russian AT. In respect to the issue of culture, the Historical-cultural theory is relevant, which is very closely linked with the Leontievs. Actually, they are parts of the same paradigm, which I have detailed in my previous paper (Mironenko 2013). However, Leontiev and Vygotsky focused on different aspects of psychic life.

Conclusions

Our “ontological” discussion turns out to be very topical, as it clearly shows the importance of ontological issues for contemporary polycentric multi paradigmatic psychological science and the relevance of the matter for cultural psychology, “context-sensitive, and culture-inclusive”, with its focus on the diversity of psychological reflections of the world, common sense as well as scientific.

Psychological discussions today cannot do without clarifying the content of the concepts we use, revealing the facts we build on, explicating ontological grounds of our theoretical constructions. Modernity requires us to break down the wall of misunderstanding between schools, grounded on the ontological issues, which Vygotsky perfectly described. Only then, we can proceed to the next step: to discussing epistemological issues, evaluating heuristic value of theoretical models, based on certain ontological standpoints. Then, perhaps, we will be able to approach the most important problem of current development of psychological science - procuring of constructive

communication and cooperation of schools in the domain of global psychological science. The “new international synthesis that has no single-country dominance of ideas and where cultural heritages of European, Asian, and American (South, Central, and North) kinds intermingle in the making of a new look at psychology” (Valsiner 2009, p.16) is hardly possible without constant efforts and insistent desire for mutual understanding across the diversified global scientific community. Creative collaboration in epistemological developments has to ground on clear comprehension of the ontological stances of the debaters.

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