

ADVANCES IN CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY: CONSTRUCTING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

# Beyond the Mind



*Cultural Dynamics of the Psyche*

Giuseppina Marsico  
Jaan Valsiner

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A volume in  
*Advances in Cultural Psychology: Constructing Human Development*  
Jaan Valsiner, *Series Editor*

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*Cultural Dynamics of the Psyche*

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## INTRODUCTION

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### *Desire for Basic Science of Human Being*

Giuseppina Marsico<sup>1</sup>

**T**his book, *Beyond the Mind: Cultural Dynamics of the Psyche*, is unusual in the content and in the format. That's why it requires an unusual look. It has to do with a man, an intellectual journey, and uncountable travels across the world over the last two decades.

This man is Jaan Valsiner, and here you will read of his restless effort to elaborate ideas while going in different places as invited keynote. This book is mainly about his intellectual trajectory, which touches several places and several interconnected topics.

He lives traveling in the mind and in the physical world, and this is what makes him so special. With a great dose of self-irony, he defines himself as E.R.O.: Estonian Round Object!

For those who have the fortune to work with Jaan Valsiner, he is our (H.)E.R.O.—Heroic Estonian Round Object—because his enthusiasm and

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never-ending striving for the new has only a few equals in our contemporary academic world.

His way of being is not just an erratic way of existence, but instead his traveling around the globe comes from the deep consciousness that new ideas emerge from the periphery of the world and of our mind. Thus, he needs to move intellectually and physically (Figure I.1).

This book is about the “minutes” of his “bigger” and well organized works, and also it is a collection of only apparently fragmented texts (mainly keynote lectures, unpublished or rejected papers) where the readers will see the “step-by-step” elaboration over the years of new ideas, theories, models, and even schemas (which Jaan likes very much—maybe especially as he claims basic inability to draw anything).

In analogy with the collection of photos of growing babies in any ordinary families, this book shows the ontogenesis and the development of a coherent theoretical framework. Like a baby who grows and becomes stronger and more skillful, the volume encompasses the birth and the development of the cultural psychology of dynamic semiosis that Jaan Valsiner has elaborated over his productive career (Valsiner, 2007, 2014). Its roots are in observations of ordinary people in ordinary life contexts—children being



**Figure I.1** What Jaan Valsiner’s passport looks like

fed in the kitchen (Valsiner, 1987), psychologists living in changing societies (Valsiner, 1988), and women dancing in temples (Valsiner, 1996) or waiting for beautiful moments of deeply personal lifelines. All this leads to a theoretical synthesis—in cultural psychology.

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## Cultural Psychology: A New Science of the Human Nature

*Beyond the Mind: Cultural Dynamics of the Psyche* offers an overview of ideas, historical roots, and areas of investigations of that sophisticated theoretical proposal that goes under the label of cultural psychology, which aims to re-establish psychology as the science of the human nature (Valsiner, Marsico, Chaudhary, Sato, & Dazzani, 2016a).

Valsiner emphasizes how psychology deals with the experiences of the human being and his actions in the world. Humans are culture-makers and, therefore, every form of human activity becomes a legitimate object of study for psychology: art, technology, and institutionalized systems of collective life, but also fashion, religious experience, entertainments, ornaments, and the different ways of treating one's own body. The talks and papers here presented may appear quite diverse in the scope of their topics but in all of them the focal point is the *dynamic of the human psyche*.

Lecture after lecture, place after place, year after year, the readers will observe the construction of the Valsiner's proposal that looks at the richness and the intricacy of the high psychological functioning and at the variety of products of collective activity.

Psychology, in its history, has shown the difficulty of dealing with the complexity of psychological phenomena. The study of higher psychological functions has been gradually replaced by the analysis of elementary mechanisms. As a result, the human psyche has been reduced to its epiphenomenon, the elaboration of a general theory of psychological functioning replaced with a plethora of almost nonsensical research findings and the focus on processes with emphasis on products. In all this, the epistemic role of culture in the organization of human ways of existence has been lost (Marsico, 2015).

*Beyond the Mind: Cultural Dynamics of the Psyche* proposes, instead, the theoretical coordinates for rethinking psychology starting from the study of the higher psychological functions and the most sophisticated products of human knowledge as they have been constructed in the history of humanity. This volume helps to trace back all the numerous and interwoven intellectual trajectories that led Jaan Valsiner to relocate the psyche at the center of the psychological investigation.

The human *Psyche* is complex, subjective, meaningful, and mysterious. As such it cannot be reduced to explanations that consider it accounted for by causal mechanisms of lower levels of organization. Thus, the efforts to reduce higher level psychological functions to physiological or genetic “causes” violates the hierarchical systemic structure of the totality of human beings. (Valsiner, Marsico, Chaudhary, Sato & Dazzani, 2016b, p. v)

Yet this book is not only about the past elaborations, but rather it is mostly about the future directions of cultural psychology. In the authors’ intentions, indeed, this is meant as a powerful heuristic tool to support further theoretical elaborations and methodological advances—because Jaan Valsiner, as always, is already looking beyond.

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## A Glimpse Into the Book

The book is organized in seven sections. Each of them contains a variable number of lectures and/or unpublished papers topically selected independently from any chronological order or geographical criterion. Starting from the epistemological foundation of psychology (Section I), the book provides an axis for understanding the dynamicity of psychological processes (Section II), the dialogical nature of the human being (Section III), and the relationship between infinities (Section IV). Then, some regulatory processes at interpersonal and societal level of analysis have been presented (Section V) followed by the discussion of specific cultural processes in society (Section VI) and of the new epistemological and methodological horizons in psychology (Section VII). Each section ends with the so called “coffee breaks.” These are not merely intermezzos, but like in a real conference setting (where the coffee break is the moment for making additional comments about the lecture), they are meant to be dialogical spaces for posing provocative questions and intellectual challenges to the keynote.

Let me conclude with a biographical note. In the last ten years, I have had the fortune to read some of the papers that Jaan was going to present in the official conference venues or some of his articles, chapters, or books. Jaan always asks some young- or more-experienced colleagues for feedback, and this is unusual in contemporary over-arrogant academia. The acknowledgments at end of the papers in this book tell a lot of the intellectual integrity and generosity of Jaan Valsiner. There is a deep desire for joint work on constructing psychology as a basic human science in this—and the readers of this book are invited to share it.

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## Note

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