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From dualism to duality:vA cultural psychological approach to cognition

(Commentary to Jytte Bang: Steps towards an ecological approach to thinking)

Dualisms do not lead psychology in productive directions. As Bang points out, this fact is especially true when it comes to conceptualizing the process psychologists refer to as "thinking." At least some traditional cognitive psychological conceptions of thinking are inadequate on account of the dualisms they entail, for instance, the disjunction they form between thinking and the many other meaningful features of human life. In her paper, Bang proposes an ecological approach based on the assumption of person-environment mutuality as a way to move toward developing a more adequate understanding of thinking. This commentary to Bang is written in a shared spirit of disbanding dualisms in how psychology conceptualizes thinking. In contrast to Bang's non-separation between the person and environment, however, it offers the notion of duality—as opposed to mutuality or dualism—to characterize the person-environment relation. As a point of origin, the duality of the person and environment offers another option for how one might, in Bang's words, extend "beyond a cognitive view on cognition."

Metaconceptual frameworks for separation – or lack thereof – between the person and environment

Psychology has conceptualized the person-environment relation in a variety of ways over the course of its history, and some of this variability relates to the use of contrasting metaconceptual frameworks. In general, metaconceptual frameworks refer to the axiomatic assumptions a researcher holds. These frameworks constitute an important—though sometimes underemphasized—component of inquiry in the social sciences, functioning as the basis from which theories (and methods) are constructed. In the case of person-environment relations, some metaconceptual frameworks lead to the sort of dualistic conundrums in theorizing thinking that Bang and others discourage. So too, however, others form the basis for conceptualizing thinking in a manner free of such difficulties.

Exclusive separation. The oft criticized dualistic person-environment relation is built upon the metaconceptual framework of *exclusive separation* (Valsiner, 1998). Within such a framework, it is supposed that the person and environment are completely *independent* of one another; that is, relations between the two are abolished (see Figure 1 below). That such a notion of separation sets the stage for dualisms is clear. The person can have an "effect" upon the environment (or vice versa) but any study of the processes through which person and environment *relate* becomes impossible.

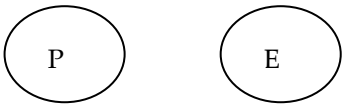

Figure 1: *Exclusive separation as a metaconceptual framework for dualism*

Non-separation. Toward combating dualisms, one possibility proposed by Bang is to use the metaconceptual framework of *non-separation*, wherein the person and environment are assumed to be without *a priori* separation (see Figure 2 below). Indeed, working from the perspective of person-environment mutuality leads psychologists away from dualisms by erasing the separation from which they arise.

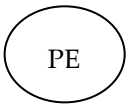

Figure 2: *Non-separation as a metaconceptual framework for mutuality of the person & environment*

Inclusive separation. A move toward person-environment mutuality as a response to dualism is built upon the understanding that *unity* is *the only* alternative to exclusive separation. While this understanding is commonly supported, a second alternative to exclusive separation does exist. The framework of *inclusive separation* (Valsiner, 1998) also provides the basis for theorizing the person-environment relation in dualism-free ways. According the framework of inclusive separation, making a distinction does not create two disjoined and independent units, rather, that distinction is the basis for *a triadic unit* containing three aspects that come into being inseparably and on the basis of one another: the

distinguished inside, the distinguished outside, and the boundary between them (Herbst, 1995). As suggested above, a framework of exclusive separation leads to dualisms on account of the 'clean break' created between the person and his or her context. By contrast, the framework of inclusive separation supports the *duality* of person-environment relations, where the person and environment—though distinct—are interdependent. The person does not function without the environment, and the environment requires the person as part of its composition: each exists *through processes of relating with the other* (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3: *Inclusive separation as a metaconceptual framework for the duality of the person & environment.*

The importance of preserving relationships between the person and environment. Inclusive separation allows the researcher to move away from dualisms *while nonetheless preserving a distinction between the person and environment.* Inclusive separation is, in this sense, a meaningful departure from the mutuality of the person-environment relation. Many researchers—including Bang—work productively within a framework of person-environment mutuality. That said, its inherent limitations can be acknowledged. While non-separation avoids dualisms, it may do so at the potential cost of eliminating the very relationship that is important to researchers. *The perspective put forth here is that by maintaining the distinction between the person and the environment, one can study the process of their relating—which itself is precisely how it is possible to see their interdependence.*

A cultural psychological perspective on person-environment relating

For humans, the process of relating to the environment can be understood as one based on the construction and use of signs (Valsiner, 1998, 2000). Within this cultural psychological perspective, signs are understood to *stand in* for other things, and can take many forms, including the classic triad of icon, index and symbol, as outlined by Charles Sanders Peirce. Within Peirce's system, an icon is a sign that stands in for something else on the basis of a similarity between it and what it represents. An index, by contrast, denotes something else by way of representing its impact. Lastly, and most broadly, a symbol stands in for something else on the basis of association and general ideas.

Using signs, the person relates to the environment through complementary processes of *internalizat*ion and *externalization* (Valsiner, 1998). Any individual can internalize different social practices and norms (i.e., what she *should* do) by way of signs. For instance, a magazine advertisement depicting women of a particular shape functions as a sign in the process of internalization when it is used by an individual to suggest she *should* modify her body's shape. Through internalization, socially suggested ideas become part of the person's highly idiosyncratic sign-mediated system of meaning (Valsiner, 2000) which is subject to transformation on the basis of the person's efforts. Externalization, as the complementary process, makes portions of this intrapsychological system accessible within the socio-cultural world, again using signs. Returning to the previous example, a woman, having transformed her own body, further strengthens the social norm upon which that transformation was based as others view her shape.

These processes of internalization and externalization comprise the relation between the *personal cultural* and *collective cultural* worlds (Valsiner, 1989). Personal culture, referring to the person's idiosyncratic sign-based system of meaning and practice, emerges on the basis of a collective culture, that is, the array of social norms and practices available to that individual. That said, collective culture does not itself belong to some social unity "out there" (e.g., "American culture" or "Japanese culture") but is understood to be located by the person. Collective culture is limited to the particular web of previously externalized (by that person or others) ideas to which one has access. Thus, personal and collective cultural worlds do not exist independently of one another, but as a duality: they are constructed relationally by way of the sign-mediated processes of internalization and externalization.

Understanding the process of relating to the environment

The inclusive separation of the personal and collective cultural worlds entails a research focus on the *process of their interrelating*. This is quite different from a common practice in psychology where the exclusive separation of the person and environment creates two separate entities which are studied and measured independently. A challenge for researchers assuming the duality of the person-environment relation is how to conceptualize that process of relating, and how to develop theoretical constructs that better express the dynamics of "boundary crossing."

Ambivalence as an analytical tool. The process of relating to the environment using signs is temporally structured. As people use signs to organize their relation to the world, they are oriented toward making sense of the present moment, but simultaneously, toward preparing for the unknown future. Within this frame, at each moment of relating to the world, a given sign says something about the immediate here-and-now which helps the person make sense of that moment, while also offering some possibilities for what *could* come next (Josephs, Valsiner & Surgan, 1999). These possibilities emerge on the

basis of the person's *imagination*, and can be a potential source of social guiding within the meaning-making process (Josephs, 1998).

If the temporal structure of human lives is taken seriously, the process of person-environment relating can be conceptualized as tension filled. Borrowing from the notion of the life space filled with forces of varying degrees of attraction and repulsion (Lewin, 1936), relating to the world formally entails the person acting within an *ambivalence* of two different person-environment orientations: a sense of *what is* presently the case and a sense of *what could come next* in the unknown future. The ambivalence of the present and future relations to the environment is understood as transformative: each sense of *what could be* challenges the existing stance and development is driven by the person's attempts to overcome this ambivalence (Abbey, 2006). The process of person-environment relating, thus, proceeds by way of the constant tension between *what is* known at the present moment and *what might happen* in the immediate future. The person overcomes this ambivalence by arriving at some new sense of *what is*, which only recreates the contrast of *what could come next*, and a new ambivalence to be overcome.

Thinking as a sign-mediated process

A focus on process—and the ambivalence it entails—is central to how cultural psychology conceptualizes thinking. From this perspective, thinking is possible because of the sign-constructing, sign using nature of humans. At any moment, the person needs to organize his or her relation to the environment, and does this using signs. The meaning attached to these signs is socially guided (on the basis of previously internalized ideas from the collective culture) as well as personally constructed, and open to transformation through overcoming ambivalence.

An illustration of a cultural psychological conception of thinking. For a detailed look at thinking from within the current perspective, I will return to Bang's example of a child's gift-buying experience. The example is as follows:

> A child is going to a birthday party of a friend. Therefore, she needs to buy a present and goes with Dad to a toy store. For the child to decide what is a proper present for her friend, she has to think, that is, she has to take into consideration several aspects of buying something for somebody: It should not be too expensive, it should be a girls' present, it should be unique and meant for exactly this friend with her interests, imaginations and so on. In short, certain specific possibilities and constraints should be considered—what is available and what is needed. Underlying and influencing this process is a personal and emotional process in the child: "what do I want to give my friend so that she will be happy and continue to like me?" Meaning, "I want to continue and to even deepen our friendship".

Collective and personal cultural worlds. In this example, the collective cultural world of the child can be understood to contain various suggestions for what *should* or *should not* happen when one gives a gift. Such ideas have been communicated symbolically to the child as she interacts with others, and through various forms of media, including television and books to which she has been exposed. Over time, the child can be understood to have internalized several of these meanings using signs, and at present functions within a complex semiotic web of ideas including the fact that the gift "*should not* be too expensive" and "it *should be* unique." Through these same processes, her personal cultural world can be further understood as containing additional meanings—also represented symbolically—including her understanding that gifts "construct friendships" and of her fondness of the child for whom the present is intended.

A glimpse of temporally structured person-environment relating Treating the example as a temporally structured moment of person-environment relating, the child can be understood to organize her experience using signs, constructing symbolically some idea of *what is* happening: "I am buying a gift." Simultaneously, and on the basis of previously internalized social suggestion, there emerges an imagined field of possible meanings for what that *could* imply: "it *should not* be too expensive" or it "*should* be unique," suggesting possible trajectories for how to proceed. These guiding suggestions do not fully determine the next moment of the person's living, but act as constraints within the ongoing situation, leading in some directions rather than others, and transforming meaning through the tension of their contrast to *what is*. As the episode continues to unfold, on the basis of the social suggestion (e.g., "It should not be too expensive") the child may orient herself toward some set of objects, arriving at her next sense of *what is*: "I will buy her a stuffed animal." Immediately accompanying this sense of what is, the child's experience can be understood as guided further by her next expectation for the future (e.g., "a more expensive gift *might* be better") and potentially leading her to consider a different ideas as she overcomes that ambivalence (e.g., "I will buy her a bike!").

***P*erson-environment interdependence.** From a cultural psychological perspective, this child is guided by her social environment and simultaneously by exerting her own influence upon it. She is interdependent with her context, and these connections simultaneously allow her to be distanced from it as she uses signs to order (and reorder) her experience. In this process, various ideas may come into play at different times on the basis of social guidance, as well as personal reconstruction of those ideas. At any moment, the meaning she attaches to one sign or another is not static. Rather, the character of her relation to the environment develops through time, emerging on the basis of overcoming ambivalence.

'Traditional' conceptualizations of cognition. A cultural psychological focus on thinking based on the inclusive separation of the person and environment deviates from Bang's ecological perspective. Yet it nonetheless shares her interest in extending beyond some traditional cognitive psychological conceptions of thinking. Comparing a cultural perspective—as here outlined—with a more classically 'cognitive' understanding, some interesting differences do indeed emerge.

Central to the present focus, from a cultural psychological view, thinking cannot be understood as something located 'within' the person in a truly "cognitive" sense—although the person is understood as the active site of construction. Clearly, it is on the basis of exclusive separation that such a traditional view of cognition emerged: after splitting the person off from the environment, the phenomenon of thinking can be further studied as though it was independent of the other meaningful features of the person's experience. By contrast, on the basis of inclusive separation—of the interdependence of the person and environment—thinking is simultaneously a social and personal process.

Also deviating from some traditional cognitive psychological conceptions of thinking, from a cultural psychological perspective actions or behaviors—such as choosing a gift—are understood as occurring through a sign-mediated process in which the person does not merely make sense of the situation using specific schemas or scripts that give outputs depending on specific input factors. Rather, they actively *make meaning* (Bruner, 1990) on the joint basis of other sign complexes which come into play at various moments and which lead—somewhat unpredictably—to an array of possible ideas. In this view, the world of the person is dynamic, continuously transforming, and for those reasons, filled with ambiguity (Abbey, 2007).

Conclusion

Consensually with Bang, the present paper supports an understanding of 'cognition' that goes beyond a traditional cognitive psychological framework and proposes a path that begins from a reexamination of the person-environment relation. However, thereafter it deviates from Bang. In the current view, a framework of 'differentiated unity' preserves the possibility of studying the process through which the person and environment interrelate, while allowing for an understanding of thinking which avoids some clearly problematic elements of a traditional cognitive psychological conceptualization.

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