Introduction: Culture in Psychology: A Renewed Encounter of Inquisitive Minds

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Abstract

This introductory chapter outlines the historical picture of the recent interest in the linking of culture and psychology, as well as the conceptual obstacles that have stood on the way of re-introducing complexity of human psychological functions—higher cultural forms—to psychological research practices. The avoidance of complex and dynamic phenomena (affective processes in feeling, religious sentiments that take the form of values, and of the high varieties of cultural forms displayed all over the World) has limited psychology's knowledge creation. In the past two decades, with the emergence of cultural psychology at the intersection of developmental, educational, and social psychologies and their linking with cultural anthropology, sociology, and history, we have observed a renewed effort to build an interdisciplinary synthesis of ideas. This takes place in the wider social context of the globalizing world. Psychology needs culture to make sense of the human lives.

Keywords: cultural psychology, causality, quantity, quality, affect, globalization

This Handbook is a milestone in the effort to re-unite two large domains of knowledge—one covered by the generic term *psychology*, and the other by the equally general term *culture*. When two giants meet, one never knows what might happen—it can become a battle or the two can amiably join their forces and live happily ever after. The latter "happy end" of a fairy tale is far from the realities of the history of the social sciences.

In the case of this Handbook, we have evidence of a multisided effort to develop the connections between culture and psychology. The time may be ripe—discourse about that unity has re-emerged since the 1980s, and cultural psychology has become consolidated since the mid-1990s around its core journal *Culture & Psychology* (published by Sage/London). The present Handbook reflects that tradition, while extending it toward new interdisciplinary horizons. The contributors— from all over the World—enthusiastically take on the task to bring culture into psychology. Such enthusiasm is needed—as revolutions, both in science and in societies, need it. Innovation in any science is impossible without the efforts of the scientists to explore the not yet known lands of the ideas that may seem nonsensical from the point of view of accepted knowledge yet tease the mind.

The complexity of the task of bringing culture into psychology as a science has been considerable. It has been historically blocked by a number of social agents (representing rivaling ideologies) who saw in this a damage to psychology as natural science (*see* Valsiner, 2012, Chapters 5–9). As a result, psychology has suffered from its self-generated image of being an "objective science"—of deeply subjective and culturally organized phenomena. Such historical myopia can be understood as a need for the discipline to compete in the representational beauty contest of the sciences. Yet it cannot win that contest—remaining such a frivolous competitor whose claims

to "objectivity" are easily falsified by yet another innovation in the social or psychological domain.

Psychology's "Blind Spot": Personal Will As a Cultural Phenomenon

Historical myopia of a discipline has dire consequences. Psychology of the last century turned out to be mute when basic human life phenomena—famines, wars, epidemics, religious piety and prejudice, political negotiations, and migration—have been concerned. It has refrained from the study of higher—volitional—psychological functions, while concentrating on the lower, simpler ones. Thus, psychology of affect has many ways to deal with basic emotion categories that are expressed similarly all around the world—yet has not made new breakthroughs in understanding the generalized feelings that lead to desirous actions and generalized values. The intentional affective actions were actively investigated until the beginning of the twentieth century in psychology but rarely later. It is the semiotic and narrative focus of our contemporary cultural psychology that restores our focus onto these humanly important phenomena. The most important cultural invention of the human psyche is the simple claim, "I want <X>!"—and it is precisely the least studied and understood theme in contemporary psychology. Although there is increasing interest, in cultural psychology, on the "I" part (e.g., Dialogical Self Theories), the "want" part of this simple meaning construction is rarely analyzed. The notable exception—Heider, (1958, 1983)—is an example of a synthesis of different European philosophical and psychological traditions. Psychology has been fearful of the willful human being and has instead presented the human psyche as an object influenced by a myriad of "factors" from all directions—biological, social, economic, even unconscious—rather than by the volition that could break out from all these confines and develop in new directions.

Why Another Effort to Link Psychology With Culture?

Given this complex history, bringing culture back into psychology is also a very multifaceted effort in today's intellectual environment. Yet the realities of social life guide us toward it—in a world where people travel voraciously and their messages travel instantly, the know-how of how "the others" function is both necessary for life and profitable for businesses.

There can be very many different vantage points from where culture could enter into psychology in the twenty-first century. First, of course, there are the realistic connections with neighboring disciplines—cultural anthropology (Holland, 2010; Obeyesekere, 2005, 2010; Skinner, Pach, & Holland, 1998; Rasmussen, 2011), and sociology (Kharlamov, 2012)—from where such efforts could find their start. Yet in the last decade we also can observe the move inside of the vast field of psychology. Psychology itself is a heterogeneous discipline—within which we can observe a number of moves toward embracing the notion of culture. Although it began from the educational and developmental concerns of the 1980s that mostly used the ideas of Vygotsky as the center of their new efforts, by 2010s the effort also includes social psychology—both in Europe and the United States—where the generic label "social" becomes frequently taken over by "cultural."

Second, it is the rapid movement—of messages and people—that renders the former images of homogeneous classes that dominated cross-cultural psychology either moot or problematic. The tradition of comparing societies (i.e., countries, re-labeled as "cultures"—e.g., of "the Mexicans" or "the Germans")—which has been accepted practice in cross-cultural psychology—loses its epistemological value. Empirical comparisons of the averages of samples "from different cultures" (i.e., countries) can bring out interesting starting data for further analysis by cultural psychology.

All this is supported by real-life social changes. It is as if the globalizing movement of people across country boundaries brings "cultural foreigners" to be next-door neighbors. The issue of making sense of their ways of living becomes of interest for the already established colonists of the given place. It is hard to remain content with the prototypical notions of "being American" when one sees a collective Islamic prayer unfolding in the middle of a major U.S. airport. The world is now different from the last century—we are in close contact with "cultural others," and all our social-psychological adaptations to this innovation acquire a cultural accent. Contemporary social psychology picks up the need to study such social events that carry complex cultural accents. It is supported by the demand of both the lay publics in different countries and their socio-political organizations to understand and administer the "cultural others" yet retain their own dominant centrality.

The Third Effort for Psychology in its History: How Can it Succeed?

This effort—uniting culture and psychology—that has been taking place from the 1990s to the present time is actually the third one[1] in the history of psychology. We can observe, in the recent two decades, multiple efforts to bring culture into the science in general. Likewise, psychology begins to enter into cultural arenas in many new ways that Little Albert,[2] Ioni,[3] or Sultan,[4] or even the dogs of Professor Pavlov could never have thought about. A number of our contributions to this Handbook—those of Christophe Boesch (2012), Alfredo Gonzalez-Ruibal (2012) and Zachary Beckstead (2012)—give the readers a glimpse of new pathways for future development of cultural psychology.

Of course, psychology's historical inroads can be seen to have delayed such return to culture. The issue has been ideological in the history of the science of psychology—how to treat complex, meaningful, intentional, and dynamic psychological phenomena? These phenomena were actively addressed in the context of emerging psychology in Germany by philosophers in the first seven decades of the nineteenth century—yet all these contributions were lost as they were guided out of the history of psychology as it was re-written after the 1870s. According to most of the history textbook views, psychology as science was born in 1879. That origin myth dates back to Boring's work on re-writing the history of psychology (Boring, 1929) that selected *as science* only some part of the wide intellectual enterprise of psychology of the nineteenth century.

Psychology as a science was born in the German language environment—first in the 1730s (Christian Wolff's *Psicologia empirica* in 1732 and *Psicologia rationalis* in 1734), followed by the anti-Wolff denial of psychology's place among other sciences by Immanuel Kant. The birth of psychology as part of educational curriculae dates to years 1806 and later—when Johann Friedrich Herbart started his first university course in psychology (Jahoda, 2008; Teo, 2007). Yet in the early nineteenth-century psychology was the realm for discourse by philosophers and theologians, with natural scientists playing a secondary role. This power relation reversed in the 1860s in favor of the natural sciences—particularly physiology. This led to the "elementaristic revolution" in psychology that started from Wilhelm Wundt's establishing his laboratory of Experimental Psychology in Leipzig in 1879. It was followed in North America by the avalanche of the "behaviorist" ideology (Watson, 1913), which has been slow to end. The intermediate birth of "cognitive science" in the 1950s from the behaviorist roots was a half-restoration of the focus on higher psychological functions. Hence, the cultural psychology movement that started in the 1980s constitutes another effort in that direction.

The Obstacles to Innovation

As psychology is non-neutral in its context of social existence, it is not surprising that its progress is constantly organized by different promoting fashions (e.g., the need to look "socially relevant") in unison with a multitude of conceptual obstacles. The latter are often the targets of discourse in cultural psychology that cannot avoid addressing them. Their relevance, of course, transcends the work in the realms of cultural psychology and would illuminate other fields of psychology.

DECISION ABOUT WHERE NOT TO LOOK: AXIOMATIC DISMISSAL OF COMPLEXITY

Many of the habits of psychology, in their insistence on the study of elementary phenomena (Toomela & Valsiner, 2010), have led to avoiding the complexities of the human psychological functioning. This happens in a number of ways: by **imperative to quantify** those phenomena that are of "scientific interest" and by **developing theories inductively**—moving toward generalization from the thus selectively quantified evidence. This all happens with the belief in the work of **elementaristic causality** (factor X causes Y; e.g., "intelligence" *causes* success in problem solving; or "culture" *causes* "girls being shy"; *see* Toomela, 2012, in this Handbook). In contrast, cultural psychology leaves such causal attributions behind. Culture here emerges as a generic term to capture the complexity of human lives—rather than narrowly concentrating on their behavior. We are back to the study of psychological dynamics in all of its complexity (Valsiner, 2009a), yet we are still at a loss about how to do that. The lead from the "second cybernetics" of the 1960s (Maruyama, 1963) and the use of qualitative mathematical models (Rudolph, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2008a, 2008b, 2009; Rudolph & Valsiner, 2008; Tsuda, 2001) instead of statistical inference can be a way to overcome the obstacles of unwarranted assumptions.

THE TERMINOLOGICAL DIFFICULTY—*CULTURE* IS POLYSEMIC

Culture is in some sense a magic word—positive in connotations but hard to pinpoint in any science that attempts to use it as its core term. Its importance is accentuated by our contemporary fashionable common language terms (multiculturalism, cultural roots, cultural practices, etc.)—hence the perceived value of the term. Yet much of "normal science" of psychology continues to produce hyperempirical work using methods that do not consider substantive innovation, even after having learned to insert the word *culture* into politically correct locations in its various texts. In this sense, the fate of culture in contemporary psychology continues to be that of up-and-coming novice who tries to get its powerful parents to accommodate to its needs.

Cultural psychology is being sculpted in a variety of versions—all unified by the use of the word *culture* (Boesch, 1991; Cole, 1996, Shweder, 1990). That may be where its unity ends, giving rise to a varied set of perspectives that only partially link with one another. This may be confusing for those who try to present cultural psychology as a monolithic discipline—but it is certainly good for the development of new perspectives. Heterogeneity of a discipline breeds innovation—whereas homogenization kills it. History of psychology gives us many examples of originally innovative perspectives turning into established "theories or systems"—and becoming followed through sets of imperatives rather than creating innovations. Psychology has suffered from too many consensual fixations of the "right" methods in the last half-century (Toomela, 2007a), rendering its innovative potentials mute. Cultural psychology as a new direction entails an effort to un-mute the discipline. It is helped by the appeal—and uncertainty—of the label *culture*.

Culture As a "Container" as Opposed to a "Tool"

The readers in this Handbook will encounter two opposite directions in handling of the notion of culture—that of a container of a homogeneous class (Fig. I.1A), and that of a unique organizer of person–environment relations (Fig. I.1B). These two uses have little or nothing in common, once more indicating the vagueness of the use of culture in our present-day social sciences.

Of course the proliferation of the notion of culture in the social sciences is no issue of science only. Reasons for that increasing popularity of a vague label are to be found beyond the boundaries of science—in the "culture stress" experienced by local communities resulting from in-migration of "others" and temporary (or not so temporary) outmigration of "our own" (Appadurai, 2006). Our globalizing world is also open to various projections of oneself to the (far-away) others. Politicians start to pretend they can say something in a foreign language in public, whereas production capacities move from their "First World" locations to the so-called "developing countries."

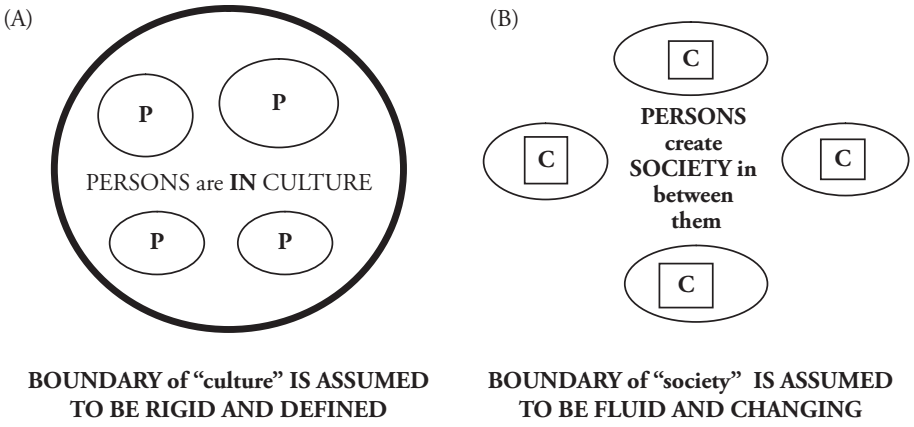

Figure I.1 Two meanings of *culture* in psychology. (A) *Culture* as a container (P = person). (B) *Culture* (C) as a tool within person.

THE HERO MYTHOLOGY—REPLACING INNOVATION BY FINISHED IDEAS

Psychologists like to tell stories—beautiful stories—about famous people of their kind who had clever ideas that are still guiding our contemporary thinking. Of course, it is in the communication process between a science and the society that the making of such "hero myths" operates in creating *cultural connectors* (Aubin, 1997, p. 300). The popularity of "being X-ian" is a token in the public legitimization of a particular perspective (e.g., "Vygotskian" is "promising," "behavioral" is "past its prime")—independently of the particular ideas used within these perspectives to make sense of some phenomenon. Freud, Skinner, Piaget, and Vygotsky are often put on the pedestal for having revealed the great secrets of the psyche. Telling such stories is dangerous for the ideas of precisely those persons who are being honored. On the theoretical side, glory stories of various "giants" such as Vygotsky, Bakhtin, Gadamer, Levinas, and others are likely to promote the mentality of following previously expressed ideas, rather than developing new ones. Rather than innovate historically solid intellectual perspectives—the makers of which tried, but still did not solve their problems—we seem to enjoy turning these "classic thinkers" into some gurus and follow them ardently. Taking a theoretical perspective becomes transformed into a membership of a fan club of one or another of such guru figures—leading to a variety of intra- and intergroup relationship issues of such groups of followers. The main function of theories—being intellectual general tools for understanding—easily gets lost. Social scientists seem to enjoy the game of social positioning. We can still observe recurrent claims of "being X-ian" ("Vygotskian," "Bakhtinian," "Freudian," "Habermasian," "Levinasian," etc.). I consider such claims misleading, because the best way to follow a thinker is to develop the ideas further—rather than declare one's membership in a virtual community. But mere membership in a community is no solution to problems that the members of the community try to solve. The scientific community is a resource for providing new solutions—rather than a club, the membership of which is determined by loyalty to old ones.

Vagueness in Science and its Functions

We know that culture's journey into psychology has already been in the making for more than two centuries (Jahoda, 1993, 2011). Such slow movement results from projection of social values into the term—*culture is not a neutral term.* It is suspect—and appealing—at the same time. Its appealing label feeds into the advancement of various streams of thought in the social sciences (Rohner, 1984; Sinha, 1996), and the constructive openness in using it as an intellectual catalyst in psychology continues.

Although it is well-known (Valsiner, 2001, 2004a) that the term *culture* is vague, as it has been proven indefinable, yet its functional role in public discourse has been growing steadily. Vagueness of a concept need not be an obstacle in scientific knowledge-building (many terms in many sciences are) and are kept vague, so as to enhance their generative potential (Löwy, 1992). As Löwy has explained:

> The long-term survival of imprecise terms points to an important heuristic role. Adopting an over-precise definition may jeopardize a promising study, while maintaining a poorly defined concept may propel fruitful research. Imprecise terms may also facilitate the study of phenomena that share some, yet poorly defined, characteristics, and that may help link distinct disciplinary approaches. The fluidity of terms at times of conceptual change makes retrospective discovery accounts especially problematic. Discoverers tend to attribute a later, fixed meaning and imprecise, fluid terms current at the time of the discovery. (*Löwy*, 1990, p. 89)

The fate of *culture* in psychology and anthropology fits Löwy's point well. Since the 1990s, we have seen the acceptance of the term by psychologists, who pride themselves in its vagueness and make it useful in various ways. In contrast, cultural anthropologists can be seen refusing to use it at all! *Culture* as a term becomes useless in anthropology, whereas it is becoming useful in psychology!

Psychology Is Becoming Global

Globalization in a science—like in economics and society—is an ambiguous process. It brings with it emergence of new opportunities together with the demise of old (and "safe") practices. The immediate result of globalization is the increase of "sudden contacts" between varied persons of different backgrounds—with all that such contact implies (Moghaddam, 2006). If "culture" is viewed in terms of a "container" (Fig. I.1A) that implies selective "border controls," segregation of immigrants into "we <>they" categories, and emphasis

on acculturation (Rudmin, 2010). If, in contrast, "culture" under globalization is seen as a tool (Fig. I.1B) it is the issue of relating to one's next-door neighbor—with both positive (mutual learning and support from one another) and negative (frictions and open conflicts over trivial local issues) that come into our focus of observation.

Science also has to learn to tolerate its often less affluent but better educated neighbor. Any casual reading of leading science journals, which may be published in North America or Europe, reveals the enormous mixture of the home countries of the scientists. People from all continents collaborate in the solving of crucial scientific problems. Not surprisingly, together with the move toward international economic interdependence comes internationalization of sciences. Like other sciences psychology is no longer dominated by few (North American or European) models of "doing science" in that area. Instead, creative solutions to complex problems emerge from the "developing world," where the whole range of the variety of cultural phenomena guarantees the potential richness of psychology.

Cultural Psychology: Its Indigenous Roots

Of course different areas of psychology are differentially open to such internationalization—cultural psychology in its recent new upsurge is thus a "developing science." Looking back, much has changed since mid-1990s (Valsiner, 1995, 2001, 2004, 2009a, 2009b), mostly in the context within which the discourses of re-entering talk about culture into psychology have been framed. Cultural psychology has been the witness—an active one—of the transformations that go on in all of psychology as it is globalizing (Valsiner, 2009a, 2009b). Nevertheless, within psychology, cultural psychology remains "indigenous"—emphasizing the phenomena, rather than data, as these are central for science.

Indigenous is not a pejorative word. We are all indigenous as unique human beings, social units, and societies—coming to sudden contact with others of the same kind, and discovering that it is "the other" who is indigenous, not ourselves. Different ways of actions follow: changing the other (by missionary or military conquests) or using the other for production (by importing slaves, or allowing "guest workers" temporarily into "our country" to alleviate labor shortages), or for consumption (creating consumer demands for our products—arms or hamburgers—in their places). In all of these adaptations to such contacts, the diversity of both human cultural and biological forms is being negotiated (Kashima, 2007; Moghaddam, 2006).

The Gains—and Their Pains—in Cultural Psychology

The last two decades of the twentieth century were productive for cultural psychology. Following the lead of the originators of the rebirth of the cultural direction (Richard Shweder, Michael Cole, James Wertsch and Barbara Rogoff in North America, and Ernest Boesch, Lutz Eckensberger, Serge Moscovici, Ivana Markova and Ivan Ivic in Europe), a number of younger-generation researchers started to look at human phenomena intertwined with their everyday contexts. By the twenty-first century, many new research directions have become emphasized—ruptures as central for new developments (Hale, 2008; Zittoun, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2010), actuations as a new way to unite actions and meanings (Rosa, 2007), generalized significant symbols (Gillespie, 2006) as well as search for the self through looking at the other (Bastos & Rabinovich, 2009; Simão & Valsiner, 2007) and finding that other in the contexts of social interdependence (Chaudhary, 2004, 2007; Menon, 2002; Tuli & Chaudhary, 2010). At the same time, we see continuous interest in the cultural nature of subjectivity (Boesch, 2005, 2008; Cornejo, 2007; Sullivan, 2007) and the unpredictability of environments (Abbey, 2007; Golden & Mayseless, 2008). The topic of multivoicedness of the self as it relates with the world has emerged as a productive theme (Bertau, 2008; Joerchel, 2007; Salgado & Gonçalves, 2007; Sullivan, 2007), including the move to consider the opposites of polyphony ("intensified nothingness," Mladenov, 1997). This is embedded in the multiplicity of discourse strategies (Castro & Batel, 2008) in institutional contexts (Phillips, 2007). Affective lives are situated in social contexts but by persons themselves as they relate to social institutions.

Old Disputes in New Form: Immediacy and Mediation

It never ceases to amaze me how old disputes reemerge in terminologically new ways. When in the 1950s psychologists were disputing the immediacy of perception (a la James Gibson) in contrast to the constructive nature of the perceptual act (a la Jerome Bruner and Leo Postman, 1950—not to forget

Ansbacher, 1937 for the origins), then 50 years later, we find a similar dispute in cultural psychology around the issues of *enactivism*, focusing on the immediate nature of cultural actions—and *mediation*—that centers on the distancing from (yet with) the immediate action (Baerveldt & Verheggen, 1999, 2012; Kreppner, 1999; Christopher & Bickhard, 2007; Crisswell, 2009; Verheggen & Baerveldt, 2007). Furthermore, the immediacy dispute is built around the John Dewey-inspired look at human development as seamless linking of person and context (Rogoff, 1982, 1993, 2003). The question of boundaries between person and environment has been actively disputed in the last two decades. Of course, human beings live within the boundary—circumscribed by their skin. Futuristic film-makers, such as David Kroonenberg, have recently experimented with images that make the skin transferrable and let objects enter and exit through the skin in surprising—and horrifying—ways.

The roots of this new focus on immediacy are in the resurgence of the centrality of the body in theorizing about human beings and its abstracted corollary in terms of the processes of *embodiment* of the mental processes (Varela, Thompson, & Ross, 1991). Refocusing on the body—under the philosophy of fighting against "mind–body dualisms"—leads to the elimination of the mind. And with the elimination of the mind goes the focus on mediation.

IMMEDIACY IN ITS ENACTIVIST FORM

The enactivist position has been put forth succinctly:

> Enactivism avoids the notion of "mediation" and problematizes the representational or semiotic status of social and cultural objects in general. Representation is a sophisticated social act and in that sense it is tautological to add the adjective "social." Moreover, this specification becomes misleading when "social" is understood in terms of sharedness, even when the notion of sharedness is systemic rather than aggregate one.
> (Verheggen and Baerveldt, 2007, p. 22)

Of course, the enactivist move against ideas of mediation triggers a counteroffensive (Chryssides et al., 2009) defending the role of social representation processes precisely as acts of social construction. The focus on social representation can be dialectical (Marková, 2003, 2012), and the act of representing can itself be embodied. It seems that it is the latter to which the enactivist viewpoint adheres.

CONSTRUCTION OF SIGNS AND THEIR USE—ALTERNATIVE TO IMMEDIACY

In contrast to the enactivist orientation, the semiotic meditational direction (Boesch, 2005, 2008, 2012; Lonner & Hayes, 2007; Valsiner, 2007) accepts the notion of mediation as an axiomatic given and concentrates on the construction of *what kind of mediating systems* can be discovered in human everyday activities and in the domains of feeling and thinking. The focus on cultural tools—or symbolic resources (Zittoun, 2006, 2007, 2012)—necessarily prioritizes the meditational view in cultural psychology. This is further supported by the work to bring Charles S. Peirce's semiotics to cultural psychology (Innis, 2005, 2012; Rosa, 2007; Sonesson, 2010). Yet bringing in the philosophy of Peirce is a kind of "Trojan horse" for cultural psychology—if on the manifest level such importation allows for new look at the multitude of signs that organize human lives. Such appealing closeness to reality is supported by Peirce's abstractions as a mathematician.

THE UNRESOLVED PROBLEM: UNITS OF ANALYSIS

The difficulty of returning to the psychological complexity in the context of cultural psychology is in the rest of psychology accepting the notion of analysis units as the atomistic concept of divisibility of the complexity to simplicity. Yet that tradition cannot work if complexity *as it exists*—rather than as it could be eliminated—is on the agenda for researchers (Matusov, 2007).

The root metaphor of the question of units in psychology has been the contrast between water (H_2O) and its components (oxygen and hydrogen), used in making the point of the primacy of the Gestalt over its constituents widely in the late nineteenth- through early twentieth-century thought. The properties of water are not reducible to those of either hydrogen or oxygen—water may put out a fire, whereas the constituents of it burn or enhance burning. Hence the whole, a water molecule, is more than a mere "sum" of its parts. Furthermore, it is universal—the chemical structure of water remains the same, independent of whatever biological system (e.g., human body, cellular structure of a plant) or geological formation (e.g., an ocean, or in a water bottle) in which it exists. Vygotsky expressed