The sign of dialogue between psychoanalysis and cultural psychology

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Abstract

This paper intends to establish a dialogue between psychoanalysis and cultural psychology, more specifically regarding the discussions about identity. It is an exercise that follows the modern trend of interdisciplinarity and, consequently, of overcoming the Aristotelian way of compartmentalizing knowledge, aiming to produce more comprehensive answers to complex issues such as identity, a very relevant theme for psychology nowadays. To do so, we begin by establishing the differences between each of the theoretical fields, showing that they are distinct theories, but not contradictory to each other and that, despite this, they can converge on the same object, contributing to its understanding. In this way we shed light over the possible points of articulation between these two fields and show that it is fully possible to approach identity in a holistic way, from distinct theoretical fields that produce new perspectives for a discussion as relevant as those that refer to identity.

Keywords: *Identity; psychoanalysis; cultural psychology; semiotics.*

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Introduction

This paper aims to promote a theoretical articulation between the psychoanalysis and cultural psychology fields in order to provide a more adequate definition for complex issues whose discussions are far from be exhausted and about which both fields can collaborate and also learn. Both "Cultural psychology and psychoanalysis move in parallel in their efforts to make sense of the complexities of the human psyche." (Valsiner, 2021 p. 45).

We chose to start by talking about what is disciplinarity and how to overcome it through interdisciplinarity, establishing the main difference between the proposed theoretical fields and promoting the first approximations from the concept of sign. Finally, we propose the use of this articulation in the discussion about what identity is and how it develops, presenting a new general perspective on the subject.

The problem of interdisciplinarity in comprehensive theories

One of the problems with the theoretical frameworks that aim at a comprehensive understanding of human beings is that they may tend to become closed and self-explanatory systems. If the goal is to explain all human phenomena through a single perspective, it become difficult to stay open and dialogue with other approaches. However, science is built through collective effort and dialogue, not through competition between opposing viewpoints. The problem of interdisciplinarity emerges exactly because contemporary scientific work tends to be more and more competitive and "compartmentalized". Besides, if the grand theories mainly originate from a Western perspective their epistemological absolutism can be even more problematic (de Sousa Santos, 2018).

It is necessary to clarify briefly what this interdisciplinarity is, which this article seeks, as far as possible, to appropriate. According to Leis (2005), interdisciplinarity cannot be defined, at the risk of submitting itself to a disciplinary criterion of definition. However, he risks stating that it can be understood as "a crossing point between activities with different logics" (p. 2), that is, the point where an articulation between two or more disciplines, two or more fields of knowledge is possible.

This logic of complementation is characterized as one of the main proposals of interdisciplinarity, as advocated by Bauer (1990), who, taking up Snow's (1993) concept that fields of knowledge such as humanities and exact sciences correspond to cultures, points out that communication and cooperation between disciplines is often hindered by a number of implicit differences between them, but which could easily be overcome by clarifying what these differences really are and how they originates from an initial concern about different subjects.

However, in some cases, the main difference is originated in the different ways how the same object is investigated, as is the case of some disciplines in the field of psychology, without this necessarily implying that they are radically opposed lines of investigation.

Nevertheless, interdisciplinarity is commonly understood *within* an academic perspective of the Global North, ending up being a territorial dispute between neighbours. The decolonizing turns in social sciences and humanities has instead question the idea of interdisciplinarity as mere overcoming of academic boundaries, promoting the idea that

true interdisciplinarity implies an act of intellectual humility in recognizing the multicentric production of knowledge and the dialogue between plural epistemic perspectives (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Carvalho & Flórez-Flórez, 2014; Reiter, 2021). This also means acknowledging the relative positions of the theories and their limitations outside the cultural-historical contexts in which they have been generated.

In face of this, in the last few years the tendency towards interdisciplinarization has been growing in such a way that many fields, once separate, have sought to produce dialogues among themselves. Psychoanalysis has not shied away from this task, and since its early days, Freud himself sought dialogues with biology, neurology and philosophy. Even if his intention to transform psychoanalysis into a science, according to the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), was abandoned later, keeping this field, until today, intentionally not submitted to the academic/scientific discourse.

Thanks to Freud's initial interdisciplinary effort that this dialogue trend was maintained and influenced works by other authors who came later such as Riveira (2002), Birman (2003), Dunker (2020) and Campos (2014), for example. The current challenge for psychoanalysis seems to be that of questioning its own universality against the awareness of pluralistic epistemologies and the decolonization movement (Hook, 2020; Swartz, 2018).

Although cultural psychology is born as historically interdisciplinary and intercultural field (Cole, 1998; Valsiner, 2014), it is not immune to the risk of absolutizing its epistemic perspective. However, as for cultural psychology, the effort of building a dialogue with psychoanalysis was no less. Many works such as those by Kakar (1989), Obeyesekere (1990),

Roland (1988), Salvatore and Zittoun (2011), Cabell and Valsiner (2011), and recently Suárez Delucchi & Fossa Arcila (2020) and De Luca Picione (2021), sought, to some extent, to promote an interdisciplinary articulation, dialoguing specifically with psychoanalysis, several times. Valsiner (2011), for example, will state that "cultural psychology has much to discover in the vast desert of psychoanalysis where the sandstorms of the unconscious are interspersed with oases of profound insights into the human psyche." (p. 7.). This statement brings us back to what Bauer (1990) presents as a common difficulty in the path of any interdisciplinary effort; the theoretical differences that, once well delimited, can be easily overcome.

This is also the pathway adopted by Salvatore & Zittoun (2011), when stating, among other things, that although cultural psychology and psychoanalysis have "radically different theories" (p. 68), both have undeniable similarities, either from the historical point of view, placing themselves as an alternative to the dominant psychology of the time, either theoretical as the fact that both, to some extent, admit the presence of semiotic mediation, besides Vygotsky himself had read and reproduced some of Freud's ideas, even if not officially. For the author, by promoting an articulation between the two theories, we can throw light on the blind spots of each of them.

Also, according to Salvatore & Zittoun (2011), some contemporary perspectives of psychoanalysis place it as a theory that can be considered semiotic, because both psychoanalysis and cultural psychology share as a central epistemological position "the idea of the centrality of meaning production in human activity" that would occur through "semiotic processes by which signs (or symbols) are constructed and constituted" (p. 13).

Based on this principle, and taking into consideration, as highlighted by De Luca Picione (2020), about the importance of the semiotic perspective for the psychological studies, it is perfectly possible to articulate these two theoretical perspectives in the search for insights, especially those that seek to account for complex phenomena and that develop at the interface subject/culture, given that, if on the one hand, despite not shying away completely from the task of explaining the phenomena that occur in the cultural field as can be observed in *Civilization and its discontents* (Freud, 1930) and *The Reverse of Psychoanalysis* (Lacan 1969-1970) for example, having as its main object the subject of the unconscious in its singularity, on the other hand cultural psychology focuses on the processes that develop at the intra and intersubjective level, privileging the collective dimension. However, cultural psychology has recently developed a particular semiotic perspective that focuses on meaning-making as an articulation of bodily and social levels and on the person as an agent capable of producing a unique synthesis of personal culture (Valsiner, 2014; Valsiner et al., 2016)

As proposed by Salvatore & Zittoun (2011), it is necessary to clarify the differences and similarities to locate the points of possible interdisciplinary articulation, or to be more precise, between psychoanalysis and cultural psychology. In this sense, the greatest and most pronounced difference between both is the focus on which their respective investigations falls: the psychoanalysis is more focused on the processes related to the unconscious and its formations, while cultural psychology focuses on the subject/culture interface, without this implying that in face of this epistemological difference, the fields are exclusively closed in their own perspectives,

without the possibility of expansion in the scope of their investigations.

For psychoanalysis, which emerges, as highlighted by Raffaelli (2006), without a clear epistemological perspective, but with a great influence from medicine, Freud's area of expertise, it was initially interested in the origin of the symptoms and how to cure them, from a clinical perspective, while, over time, the unconscious and its formations were taken as the privileged object of investigation; jokes, fallacious acts, etc., as well as how this constitutes the person.

This more person-oriented perspective is what we highlight here as one of the main characteristics of psychoanalysis, including drives, desire, jouissance (Lacan, 2006) and other concepts that come after Freud, but that are related to the singularity of the persons.

As far as cultural psychology is concerned, it would not be correct to state that its focus falls only and exclusively on what is called "intrapsychic processes" (Valsiner, 2000, p. 55), or "intramental" (Vasconcellos & Valsiner, 1998), which correspond to the field of relationships between individuals. These can be understood as part of a dialogical theoretical perspective, which focuses not only on collective dimension, but also on the personal one, understanding that both are interdependent. In Valsiner's (2021) formulation, semiotic cultural psychology elaborates on Stern's personological perspective (1938) leading to a "sociogenetic personalization" (Valsiner, 2007, p. 211). In this sense, the self is at the interface between an inner infinity and the outer world (figure 1).

The semiotic mediation that takes places at interface of the present meaning-making is an active synthesis which is alimented by the double movement of projection outward to the

world and the introception - inserting meanings into the relation with the World. The person is thus a unique place of synthesis, a living whole, a *unitas multiplex*, who is making sense of the world in relation to her own goal oriented affirmation. However, at the two sides of the interface, realities unfold that cannot be entirely semiotized – hence the term inner and outer infinities. Human life is marked by experiences, which cannot be fully expressed through signs – for signs imply a communicability of these experiences – yet constitute the most profound and personal part of our selves. Sometimes, human beings can experience the direct conjunction of inner and outer infinities where semiotic mediation is left silent and only embodied experience is possible, as in the case of mystic religious experiences, oceanic feelings or orgasm (Klempe & Lehmann, 2021).

Psychoanalysis and semiotic cultural psychology both acknowledge the idea of *unitas multiplex*, the person as a polymorphic synthesis of the inner infinity which of course originates during ontogenetic development, but it is not limited to the sum of one's own previous experiences. The movement of introception - higher order processes of the psyche

such as loving, understanding, creating, consecrating (Valsiner, 2021) – and the movement of internalization - person's assimilative/accommodative processes that transform the encoded information from/about the world into internalized personal knowledge (Valsiner, 2007) – is a creative one. It "moves towards constantly open horizons both in the interior of one's *Psyche* and in the exterior of one's exploration of the external world and creating its meaningfulness." (Valsiner, 2007, p. 211)

The concept of sign

Once the main points of differentiation between psychoanalysis and cultural psychology have been clarified, we begin to shed light on their possible similarities, or more precisely, on the points where a theoretical articulation is possible, as is in the case of the concept of sign, as we will see next.

When the word sign is used in psychoanalytic literature, it usually occurs in the form of a Lacanian adaptation of Sassure's linguistic sign. On the other hand, as highlighted by Cardoso (2012), despite the little attention given to the relationship between the works of
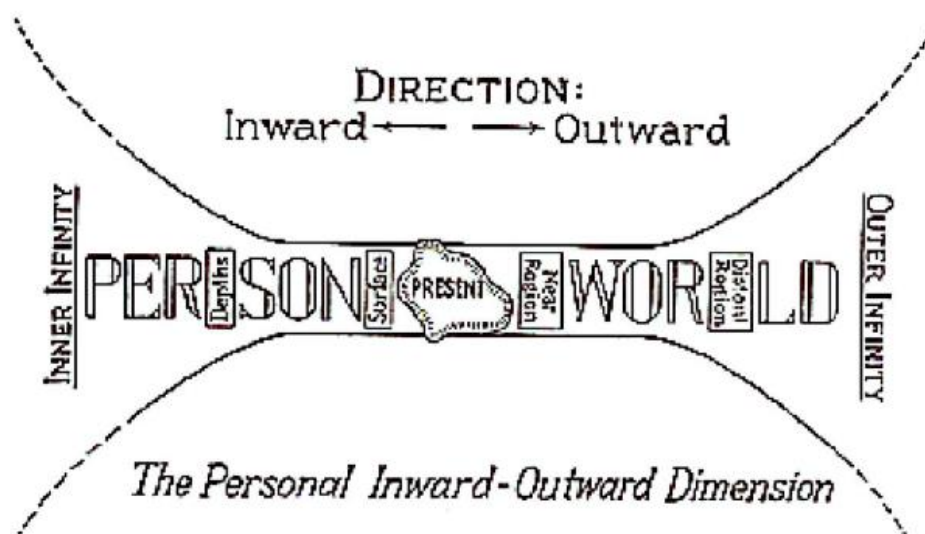

Figure 1: William Stern's depiction of the Person <> World relationships (from Stern, 1938, p. 94)

Lacan and Peirce, references to the Peirce are very constant and of fundamental importance for the understanding of Lacanian thought (Starnino, 2016).

Still, although the concept of semiotic sign in contemporary psychoanalysis has undergone changes that move it away from Peircean semiotics (Cardoso, 2012), this does not imply that the concept of semiotic sign cannot be, to some extent, located in the origins of psychoanalysis, more precisely with Freud.

By emphasizing the important influence of the natural sciences, more specifically psychiatry, in the foundation of psychoanalysis, we admit not only the initial interdisciplinary character of this field, but also its emergence as a clinical practice, that is, a practice that is based on the observation and analysis of symptoms as signs of an illness. For, if "the disease is the whole, the symptoms are the phenomena or signs that constitute it" (Branco, 2018, p. 54), then any and all clinical practice would initially be based on the reading and analysis of symptoms to determine the pathology.

In this sense, despite the fact that the term sign never appeared in Freud's publications, this does not mean that it is not present in other ways, because by taking aphasias, paralysis and even dreams as objects of clinical investigation, it was, ultimately, taking them as signs of a pathology. And even other phenomena, such as jokes, lapses and failed acts, for example, which were no longer analysed as symptoms or signs of a pathology, as it was initially believed (Freud, 1895) and began to be recognized as phenomena that attest to the existence of the unconscious (Quinet, 2000), have not lost their nature as signs.

These signs of the unconscious are very close to what is proposed by Peirce's semiotics, more specifically the signs of the index type, which indicate the existence of something else (Peirce, 1998; Valsiner, 2007a, 2007b). Initially as signs of some pathology and later as formations of the unconscious.

With the linguistic turn influencing contemporary psychoanalysis, one thing is certain; the signs are related to language and, consequently, to the way which the person relates to the world. And it is precisely on this line, of the signs as mediators of the person's relationship with the world, that semiotic cultural psychology follows.

According to Valsiner (2001), "signs are part and parcel of human psychological functioning - linking the person with the world" (p. 86), that is, they play an important role in the person-world interface: "Signs operate psychologically only through human intrapsychological worlds. Without human personal worlds there could be no signs" (p. 87). Cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics is based on Peirce's conception of sign as universal feature of living beings. This becomes very productive also for psychoanalytic theory to the extent that it overcomes the logocentric problem in psychology. A sign is not limited to verbal behaviour, it is a complex relationship between elements and implies the existence of an interpreter. The elements composing the sign-system are in relationships of:

a) *Substitution* because the representamen stands for its object by definition.

b) *Distinction* because by logic the representamen cannot be the object it represents.

c) *Unification* because the semiotic production of the sign brings into the same whole elements that were not

necessarily sub-parts of the triad before.

d) *Temporality* because semiosis takes place into irreversible time: something always turns into something else that turns into something else, etc. (Tateo, 2018a)

These characteristics of the sign complex are not limited to the human language but are proper of semiosis and can be mapped onto the meaning-making process as understood by psychoanalysis. Semiosis is strictly related to the flowing of time. Every act of interpretation establishes a *habit*, a constraint over the range of future possible sign productions and interpretations. The constraints can be both originated by social suggestions and by personal goals. Social suggestions channel the semiosis into a socially desirable direction (not everything can be said) while personal habits channel it into a personally desirable direction (goal orientation). The constitution of subject can be understood not only as the summative process of channeling (this would be a too simplistic view), but also as the history of resistance (Chaudhary, et al., 2017), negotiation and innovation between the inner and outer infinities.

With this we can understand that for there to exist signs it is necessary to have a personal world or, to be more specific, in an approach to a psychoanalytic view, its necessary to have a person to give meaning to the sign.

An identity for psychoanalysis and cultural psychology?

We come then to the moment of finally promoting the articulation between psychoanalysis and cultural psychology regarding identity. The ambiguous title of this section is not without a reason, and it aims precisely to make us think about the complexity of the discussions about what is identity and how we can think about it today from this theoretical articulation, in a way that does not create a new discipline, but a new and interdisciplinary perspective about the theme.

Promoting this theoretical articulation is not a task as simple as it might seem, because it requires the rigor required to bring these two fields together, avoiding the traps of the pure didactic repetition of differences and similarities, to instead propose, in an interleaved way, to use the theoretical point of view of one to shed light on the opacity points of the other, in a process similar to the one suggested by Zittoun and Salvatore (2011) when seeking the pathways for the synthesis between psychoanalysis and cultural psychology.

It is following this line that when we talk about an identity for psychoanalysis and cultural psychology we suggest thinking what we can understand as identity from this interdisciplinary articulation, because if for psychoanalysis the identity cannot be understood as a fixed, static construction and close to the Cartesian notion of subject identical to himself (Teixeira, 2017; Perez & Starmino, 2018) for cultural psychology the identity can be taken as a narrative elaborated by the person to talk about himself (Hammack, 2008).

Like signs, Freud also did not deeply approach identity, and his only mention to the term is present in Address to the Society of B'Nai B'Rit in the 1941, when talking about his sense of belonging to the Jewish community, he states that there is a clear consciousness of inner identity. In this sense the author seems to refer to a conscious construction, as identification with a particular group/culture, which in this specific case is the Jewish community.

If we trace a parallel between this punctual use of the term identity by Freud, as well as his theoretical elaborations about identification, it is possible to think of a certain correlation between both, since identity is taken here as what links the personal sphere of the subject in its singularity to the collective sphere of culture. In other words, now bringing us a little closer to cultural psychology, it is possible to approximate identity to the expression (intrapsychic) of collective cultural characters.

In this way, when we analyze this construction about identity from the perspective of the articulation between psychoanalysis and cultural psychology, we suggest taking identity as a presentation card that is located precisely at the person/culture interface, or, more specifically, at the intersection zone between the personal and the collective.

In *Group psychology and the analysis of the ego*, Freud (1921, p. 60-63), presented the concept of identification as the oldest form of connection between people, a way of configuring one's own "Ego" in the likeness of the one taken as "model" (Freud 1921, p.64), a process that begins in childhood, taking the parental figures as a kind of first models.

With this, Freud presented the foundations for what later, from psychoanalytic literature, can be understood as identity, with Jacques Lacan, some years later stating in his Seminar 24 (1976) for example, that "identification is what crystallizes into an identity" (p. 3).

In this sense, a good definition for identity from the psychoanalytic perspective would be to consider it as the mosaic of identifications that a person establishes in the course of his or her life, without losing sight of the fact that this is a dynamic process that,

although it has been considered as "what crystallizes" (Lacan, 1976), does not necessarily refer to something fixed.

In the field of cultural psychology, on the other hand, identity can be understood as a kind of mechanism that provides meaning and coherence to a person's lived experiences (Hammack, 2008, 2011; Hammack & Cohler, 2009). We would say, that actually the whole thing operates in a two-way street and that identity is the result of this process of signification, while at the same time acting as a guide to new significations.

This is about understanding identity as a dialogical process that guides not only how a person defines himself, but also how the person may define the world around himself, having his choices and actions guided, to some extent, by this principle, just like the bidirectional model of cultural transfer, as presented by Valsiner (2007).

In other words, looking at identity from the articulation between psychoanalysis and semiotic cultural psychology, is to consider it as a dynamic narrative construct, elaborated from the numerous identifications established by a person throughout his life, which will guide not only the meaning of new experiences, but also the actions of each person. This is a perspective that also allows us to understand identity as the result of a reflexive semiotic process, as addressed by De Luca Picione (2019) that allows not only the construction, but also the transformation of the person's own sense of experience, because ultimately it is also from what we understand here as identity, that a person will be able to interpret the world around him.

If identity develops from identifications, they are identifications with what? We argue they are identifications through and with signs. Signs produced by all the people who

are part of the relationships established by someone, both close - such as parents, relatives, friends, and neighbours – and not so close - such as social entities like the State, the country, or the community. Emphasizing the importance of considering semiotic mediation in discussions about what identity is and how it develops. The process of semiotic mediation is so crucial because it enables a wide range of identification forms, with persons, images – as in the case of a celebrity - or even with abstract or non-existing objects - such as values like freedom, nationhood, etc. - (Tateo, 2018b). Human beings can sacrifice their life - to the point of being killed - or sacrifice others' lives - to the point of killing – in the name of such forms of identification (Tateo, 2018b), as we can unfortunately witness in these very same days.

At least, what would this identification with signs be? If identification is a form of connection between people, which occurs from the adoption of traits and characteristics, ideals and values of people or social entities, those traits (or characteristics, ideals and values) are signs, eventually. They are imbued with deep symbolic value beyond their material qualities. Hence, we propose that articulating psychoanalysis and cultural psychology it is possible to understand identity as constituted through the process of identification with signs. This process takes place precisely at the interface between the subject and the culture, because it is not possible to identify to oneself, but always to another that will serve as a model. We see ourselves through the gaze of the others, and we see the others through ourselves. This "seeing as" is also the stem of the identification process and but also the dialectic process that makes identity a continuous work of (sometimes painful) construction, maintenance and reconstruction.

Conclusions

If the linguistic turn, as mentioned above, acts as an influence for contemporary psychoanalysis and puts it in a similar position to cultural psychology regarding the sign, on the other hand, it also had its role, if not in the compartmentalization of knowledge, in the hierarchy of different paradigms, because when it was assumed that everything in the epistemic field is a matter of language, it naturally slid into a conception that there would be an evolution in the way we communicate reality, that is, there would be evolved and primitive ways of saying the same thing.

According to Viveiros de Castro (2020), just as the linguistic turn created an abyss between the sign and its referent, practically detaching language from the world it sought to speak about, it also fostered classical exclusions, such as "myth and philosophy, magic and science, primitive and civilized" (p. 110). Other ways of seeing could not be tolerated, everything was a matter of the language that was being used, myth was nothing but an irrational way of trying to understand the world around us and that was slowly replaced by philosophy, magic was nothing but a primitive way of trying to dominate nature and that was slowly replaced by science, the original peoples, pejoratively called primitive, were nothing but humans who had not yet been graced with the blessings of civilization. The result of this is a generalized epistemicide, which denies the essence of several paradigms and fields of knowledge to place them only as rudimentary versions of others that would be in accordance with the discourse of the time.

For Viveiros de Castro (2020), we are living a new turn, but this time in a different

and disciplinarily more tolerant direction, embracing a replacement of "hierarchical totalities" by "flat multiplicities" (p. 110-111) The author, that arise to equalize the value of different paradigms and this is the first step to allow one of these to dialogue with the other, or the vision of one to be read in the light of the other without falling into the trap of inferiorizing what is different.

If this can be true when talking about such different paradigms, such as that of the anthropologist and the savage on which the quoted author focuses, it can also be true for non-excluding paradigms such as those of psychoanalysis and cultural psychology, which are part of the same culture.

Psychoanalysis, from the beginning, had as its main focus the subject, although it has had its moments to look at the social, but even in these moments the analysis of culture has always been made starting from the clinic to understand society, that is, it was by analyzing the subject and how it relates to the social that it became possible to abstract from this relationship a mass vision. Cultural psychology seems to follow the opposite, having focused on the social, it ends up penetrating this mass and bumping into the subject that composes it. In this way, even starting from different points, with different theoretical tools, it is fully possible to put these two fields of knowledge in a dialectical relationship where one can help the other to fill its gaps, especially at this point where the enigmatic relationship between the subject and culture takes place.

Understanding identity as a construct that develops at the subject-culture interface is only possible from the articulation between these two fields, resulting in an entirely new perspective on the theme, which shows us that the articulation between psychoanalysis and cultural psychology, working with aspects once mistakenly understood as opposites, is not only possible, but also allows us to reach new and interesting conclusions about multifactorial phenomena such as this one. Even though the trend towards interdisciplinarization has existed for some time, articulating these two specific fields is a relatively new and challenging initiative.

In a world with more than seven billions of people coexisting together, it is not possible to think identity as something completely separated from intersubjective relationships, so that studying this theme from an articulation that takes into consideration both the personal and collective aspects involved, turns out to be a promising path, so that we can think now not only of knowing more about identity, but of understanding how it articulates with other spheres of personal and collective life.

Finally, the next steps in this direction involve developing this articulation further, thinking about what is the influence of sociocultural aspects on identity development, for example.

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