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Valences, Traces And New Synthesis In Social Representing. Commentary of J. Valsiner's Creating sign hierarchies

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Based on a chemical metaphor, Valsiner's (2013) model proposes to consider social representations as semiotic processes regulating developmental dynamic. In this paper I pursue this exploration by considering situations in which people's trajectories lead them to confront with conflicting social representations. Based on the two cases of young women's war experience, I suggest (i) that social representation have, for a given person, different "weight" than others, because they have longer story for him or her; (ii) that social representations might have positive or negative "valences", due to their emotional resonance; and that (iii) the existence of specific conditions of "natural laboratories" might help us to account for the processes by which people nonetheless engage into new forms of representing.

Keywords: Semiotic Processes, Development, Cultural Psychology, Catalysis, War, Emotions, Historicity, Externalization.

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TOWARDS A NEW INTEGRATED GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY

In *Creating sign hierarchies – Social representation in its dynamic context*, Jaan Valsiner (2013) proposes a rereading of social representation theory from a semiotic perspective. Considering social representations as temporal processes of re-presenting, always oriented towards the future and thus being actual *enablements* (Valsiner, 2003), Valsiner focuses on the thinking and action of the persons in a given social and cultural context. Social representing occurs within the semiotic hierarchies by which people regulate their own conduct, as semiotic resources facilitate, orient, or forbid certain options. In such a reading, then, social representations become active and relevant at the articulation between individual trajectories and the evolution of society. In other words, Valsiner's attempt can be seen as a contribution toward a new general psychology (or NAP – *Neue Allegemine Psychologie*, Valsiner, 2012; 2013), including diverse domains of social and cultural psychology, and thus as an active resistance to the movement of fragmentation of the field (Toomela, 2010). Valsiner indeed integrates phenomena located at different levels of analysis (Doise, 1982), yet united by their common shared assumption – i.e. the dynamic and historical understandings of semiotic processes at the heart of individual and collective processes.

The model proposed by Valsiner, showing how social representations become resources for the regulation of sign hierarchies emerging when people are facing various situations – and especially rupturing ones – is parsimonious and powerful. With the idea of sign hierarchies in irreversible time, it suggests that social representations as "tensions between personal will and social obligations" can have an enabling, but also an inhibitory function as meanings become oriented toward a yet-unknown future. Using a biochemical analogy, he proposes a grammar of semiotic processes: social representations as signs can be understood as promoting or enabling, inhibiting but also circumventing meanings, when they override other semiotic hierarchies.

MODELS AS PRAGMATIC TOOLS

As Valsiner himself proposes, the best way to examine the ramifications of a model, and to eventually enrich it, is to use it to read empirical cases (Valsiner, 2007a). A good model enriches our understanding of the real, and in some cases makes it actionable (Cornish & Gillespie, 2009;

James, 1904); in addition, very often, the reality resists to our model's reductions, and calls for its expansion – this is the whole idea of abduction.

One strategy is to explore the model in extreme cases: cases in which maximal (and improbable) resistance to social representing occurs, and cases of total submission. A complementary one is to examine complex cases, as rich as possible to human experience, and embedded in the messiness of their sociocultural environment.

Regarding extreme cases, Valsiner (2013) accounts for situations in which semiotic guidance cannot be resisted with the example of the patient described by Janet (1919), who has to 'obey' to any street sign or advertisement as no inhibitor signs stop the social suggestion. On the contrary, the case of the person resisting hypnotic suggestion described by Bektherev (1903, quoted in Valsiner 2013), shows how a person can radically inhibit the social regulation proposed by a hypnotist. Such observations raise some questions: what is it that allows the person to oppose a sign to another one, as well to subsume one to another? Under what conditions a person can resist to social order, or impose his or her own will?

SEMIOTIC REGULATION AND THE MESSINESS OF REALITY

Demonstrations are convincing when they are simple. Examining social representing in "purified" exemplary case allows to show core mechanisms. Nonetheless, at times simplicity demands for simplification and, as a consequence, some of the messiness of the real is lost. Contrarily to the cases just mentioned, people are usually exposed not only to one or two invitations from the social, but to complex semiotic hierarchies, with multiple social guidances or social representations applying. For instance, going back to an example of social representation in a semiotic hierarchical control system, a person not merely decides to eat or not to eat a cake just guided by his or her desire ("I want to eat C") and by the inhibiting force of social representing about slimness ("I shall not eat C"), as he or she was in a social vacuum. On the other hand, the decision always takes place in a given social location where, for instance, many friends are present and the cake has been cooked by a "beloved aunt" who probably will be met soon again. Hence, other social representing are added to the situation under stake, such as either the guidance toward social conformity ("I shall not be the only one not to eat C") or emotional and

relational motives ("I shall not hurt aunt A"). In a situation like this, it becomes difficult to decide which representation enables another one, which one inhibits a second one or circumvents a third one.

Following Valsiner's attempt to enrich social and cultural psychology with notions coming from biochemistry – such as these of inhibitor, promoter, catalyst, and regulator, which allow to describe dynamics of semiotic mediation (Cabell, 2010; Valsiner & Cabell, 2012) – my proposition is here to open a space for considering the "weight", or "valence", of various social representations in a given situation. Concretely, this will invite us to examine, first the historicity of the situation and its social-cultural specification, second the roots of a representation in a person's emotional-embodied experience and personal culture, and third the very conditions in which the data showing such semiotic dynamic are collected.

LIVES AT WAR

I will base this empirical and theoretical exploration on two examples taken from studies examining young people's experiences of war. Living at wartime is a dramatic situation, but from a researcher's perspective, it has the advantage of showing how people react to extreme conditions within which semiotic work is particularly activated. In effect, situations of war and conflict are usually accompanied with intensive ideological discourses, widely diffused; general values are publically mobilized to justify events and intergroup relationships are transformed. Ruptures are experienced both collectively and at the scale of each person's daily life, and with them intense emotions are raised. Social life is accelerated, history is in the making, individual lives are challenged (Haffner, 2003) – and as the familiar becomes radically unfamiliar for all, social representations become extremely important – and become connected to matter of life or death.

In the following, I will briefly describe an example concerning the experience of war to advance some issues that I will eventually explore on the basis of a previous analysis of a longitudinal case study (Gillespie, Cornish, Aveling, & Zittoun, 2008; Zittoun, Aveling, Gillespie, & Cornish, 2012; Zittoun, Cornish, Gillespie, & Aveling, 2008; Zittoun, 2008).

Cases of multi-layered determination of meaning are frequent in the writings collected by Colette Daiute as part of her work with young people having experienced the war in the Balkans (Daiute, 2010; 2013). For instance, different social representations collide in the text written by Margareta, a 16 year old woman, who grew up during the war in Croatia and who writes about this conflict during a NGO workshop organised to empower young people:

> I can't think of anything except the Homeland war. Yugoslavia fell apart. Then the Serbs, aggressors, destroyed Croatia and my hometown as well. I don't know how the participants felt. I do know that in my family there was optimism and hope for better future. The Serbs had a plan to become a huge and a powerful nation. Conflict was solved with Croatia's victory in the war. Today we have an independent country. These hopes came true. But the life in Croatia is not even close to the one we expected it would be (bad privatization, corrupted politicians, low life standards, etc.) (Daiute, 2013, p. 186).

Daiute suggests that this narrative strongly "ventriloquates" (Valsiner, 2002) the ideological discourses flowing in the young woman's environment during the war, as emerged when she considers "The Serbs as the aggressors" who destroyed her town and against whom Croatia was full of optimism and eventually won. In contrast, more critical statements about current corruption in Croatia can be read as the echo of family discourses, disappointed with Croatia's inability to keep its promises. We could thus see such a statement as the locus of a conflict between two social representations, the first encompassing "the Serb aggressors vs. good Croatians", and the second including "the Croatian State is corrupted". These social representations appear related to different social others, the former reflecting discourses hold by the government and the media during the war, and the latter mirroring discourses hold by family and friends as the State fails to make a new success. According to Daiute, the challenge here concerns how the young woman can find enough agency to engage herself and other peers in actions to rebuild their country. In other words, social representations neutralize each other – the Croatian State was right and good against the Serbs AND the Croatian State was corrupted – so

that one might imagine how the young woman might have felt, facing the question "so who I am now as a Croatian and what can we do now?".

THE HISTORICITY OF SOCIAL REPRESENTING

This case suggests that conflicting representations are not caused by simultaneous events; in the life course of Margareta, at first war in the country has been experienced, and then family has discussed the challenging issue of the reconstruction of Croatia. While Margaret moved through spheres of experiences, she internalized different discourses, present and redundant in each environment. At the social level, some discourses might have slowly lost their relevance and the social institutions or the social actors that hold them might have lost their credibility or their power. At the individual level, discourses and social representations met earlier in life and so internalized do not simply disappear when a person moves across social spaces or when discourses disappear in the environment. Otherwise nobody would be nostalgic of a previous and long-forgotten government, or would regret the face a town had before reconstruction as it is still vivid in one's mind eyes. Older internalizations neither disappear nor are simply assembled or replaced. People's memories rather consist in slowly elaborated architecture of signs and discourses which are always open to revision in the light of new representations, which themselves can be modified by the shadows of older ones. Hence, dealing with conflicting discourses is also dealing with a personal archaeology of sedimented and synthesized traces of experiences.

In the present, two conflicting representations might have more or less deep roots in people's experiences and social trajectories. To support this point, I will rapidly draw on the more systematic analysis of the diary-based longitudinal case study of June, a young woman who experienced World War II in UK (Gillespie, Cornish, Aveling, & Zittoun, 2008; Zittoun, Aveling, Gillespie, & Cornish, 2012; Zittoun, Cornish, Gillespie, & Aveling, 2008; Zittoun, 2008). We showed how, during the war, June moved through diverse communities (her family on the seacoast, a "homefront" farm, a youth hostel for young soldiers). Moreover, we emphasized also how, in the specific representational context of a country at war – with its propaganda,

broadcasts, etc. - some representations were distinctive of specific spheres of experience, and how these evolved within each sphere (Gillespie et al., 2008). We showed for instance how June had to deal with contrasting definitions of what meant being a young woman while being exposed to changing social representations and personal experiences. Examining what we called "semiotic sets" – signs complexes made out of mediators of various degrees of generality – we could observe how some sets of representations were obviously supported by social forces which were stronger than others (Zittoun et al., 2012).

We first showed how, at the beginning of the war, June was using the set of "the decent woman" to mediate her decisions and actions, so encouraging herself to be hard-working, modest, not flirting, and waiting for a marriage with a decent man; we pointed out how later, working on the home front, she felt a great ambivalence, as the war conditions brought her to act like "this kind of girl" – flirtatious, sexual, inconsequent - in contradiction with the "decent woman", yet tolerated by the immediate context of farm life. Hitherto, the tension became tolerable when she was able to redefine war as a liminal state, a "state of exception", in which it appeared acceptable – for others and for herself – to be playful and inconsequential. We finally showed how, through that state of exception, the young woman learned to be a skilled worker, responsible for herself, ready to take a political role and to be a public figure; a third semiotic set, which we called "the independent woman", thus emerged. As June had to decide whether to maintain a good and stable relationship with a young man met at the end of the war or end it, the semiotic set of "the decent woman", still present in the background, entered in conflict with the one of "independent woman" – both guiding towards very different actions and life-paths, the former promoting the life-path of a modest wife following her husband and taking care of family, and the latter opening the life-path of a free woman, working and expecting passionate love stories. Eventually, June let "the independent woman" semiotic set won, which we could understand both as solidly rooted in her accumulated life experience over the war time, and as supported by a changing societal environment where many woman were empowered by their home front experience and developed the whole suffragette movement, thus participating to a deep transformation of the available social representations (Gillespie et al., 2008; Zittoun et al., 2012; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2012).

Such studies thus suggest that, for any social representation likely to guide one's actions, there might be other, contradictory ones, which can be back-grounded, shadowed, or on the contrary actively opposing to each other. In addition, for any such a social guidance, there might be specific social conditions which enhance the efficiency of some social representations, or neutralize other ones.

In other words, social representations are not neutral: on the one hand, they are enhanced or tamed by the evolving contexts, so they might acquire a heavier weight in semiotic operations, if redundancy is particularly important or if the social others or authorities that support them have many ramifications in the person's environment. On the other hand, they do have a social history, and also, a trajectory in the person's life; even when passing, they leave traces, like the luminous tale of a comet. Still, one question remains: if this is so, how can a person resist to the over redundancy of social representations, and how can new representations emerge? Hence, in our first example, what would Margareta need to move beyond her conflicting social representations? In the second example, how can the new semiotic set of an "independent woman" emerge?

EMOTIONS AND THE BODY IN REPRESENTING

Before answering this we need to explore another aspect of the messiness of human experience: emotions. In Daiute's observation, one might feel the importance of the emotional quality of the experiences at hand. Part of the intensity of Margareta's statement, one might hypothesises, comes from the living memory of a child growing during war, who learned to move in a town under siege and to listen to falling bombs (Daiute, 2012) – a life experience which involves intense fear and probably anger.

Valsiner has widely shown the importance of emotions in semiotic regulation (Valsiner, 2005, 2007b). On the theoretical side, the question is thus to propose an analysis that fully integrates the process of social representing with that one of emotional elaboration, so as to account for cases in which emotions resist, or, at the contrary, reinforce the strength of social representing. Although social representations are in principle more abstract than emotions, and therefore likely to canalize them, emotions are themselves generalized to specific images and representations – for instance, the fear of bullets might become a negative dislike of any loud

noise in the street, including festivals or other peaceful events. Hence, a variety of conflicts between representations in semiotic guidance might be the one that take place between social representations rooted in affects and embodied experience and emotions otherwise generalized to wider semiotic constructs.

In other words, social representing has not only a tale – it has also embodied and emotional roots, and these roots confer specific positive or negative valences to the work of representing. The biochemical analogy might invite us to consider the non-neutrality of various semiotic units. As various atoms entering in the constitution of molecules have electrostatic properties that allow them to be bound one to the other, or that repel one from the other, that bring stability to the molecules, or that render them instable, it might be interesting to consider which is the strength that social representations might have for a given person, or whether they facilitate synthesis or resistance, because of such valences.

In the cases of the two young women, emotions might have been in support of some representations over others, or they might have facilitated resistance. June for instance was able to discuss conflicting representations during the periods in which she was happily and actively engaged in community life; later on, in periods during which her anxiety became visible – through alterations of her writing – she seemed much less able to resist conflicting representations and to propose alternative solutions. Also, her final choice to become a more independent woman was probably supported by her progressive taming of the fear of the unknown, or of the pleasure to be independent. Although these equations are extremely complex, one might consider the role of fear or anger in Margareta's former forms of representing, which might have evolved together with the transformation of these emotions.

SPACES FOR CREATIVE SYNTHESIS

These considerations finally lead to examine the conditions in which Margareta might solve the emerging contradiction. Social representation theory classically suggests that the plurality of conflicting social representations in a given social environment invites distancing, and opens the potentiality of freeing oneself of their constraining forces (Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Ivinson, & Psaltis, 2003). Yet such potentialities often do not burgeon in new initiatives – otherwise our

world would be a different place. In the case reported by Daiute, there is obviously the need of something else for such disentanglement to occur. Here, we might suggest, it is because the young woman had been invited to participate to the safe and protected activities of a NGO, where she was encouraged to use narratives to unfold these internalized social guidance, that she eventually found a way to define her own path.

Similarly, in our analysis of war diaries, we can make hypothesis about the many social spaces in which June could have found occasions to feel enough safe to externalize and explicate her doubts and worries, and so explore alternative situations – with her sister, with other young women at war, doing theatre in youth hostels, reading novels, etc. (Zittoun et al., 2008). Yet one aspect comes to the fore: the very process by which data were produced, that is, the writing of the diary itself during war time (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2012). Addressed to Mass Observation, a nation-wide initiative to document people's lives, the diary was initially constituted as a socially authorized secured frame to reflect about one's life. Later, diary writing became for June a bracketed time and space to think-write her doubts, conflicts, and hesitations, and a way, through externalization itself, to progressively transform them, distance from experiences, and so create new options.

To expand on the chemical metaphor, we might say that some operations take place in very protected and isolated conditions – such as the "white rooms" of physical laboratories in which the conditions are purified from external perturbations for specific new synthesis to occur. Hence, writing a diary, participating to a NGO workshop about life narratives, but also perhaps, answering a researcher's question, or even having a good discussion with a friend, might be such natural "white rooms" or naturally occurring laboratories in which new synthesis are more likely to occur. As shown by Cabell and Valsiner, in such conditions, in addition catalysts and regulators might support these processes (Cabell, 2010; 2011; Cabell & Valsiner, 2014; Valsiner & Cabell, 2012). Typically, the use of symbolic resources, as well as the specific process of externalizing the flow of thinking to speech or writing, function as catalysts and regulators which seem to accelerate such semiotic processes (Kadianiki & Zittoun, 2014).

Hence, the solution to our question – how can a person, in his or her trajectory, find his or her way through contradictory social representing, or get new ideas – might reside in the combination of these various aspects: different social representations have different weight due to

their social history and local social others who support them; but their history *in* the person is very important to consider as well. Actually, within the entire life courses, people might have other semiotic resources on which they might draw and that might enable them to resist new contradictory discourses. Also, representing is not emotionally neutral and if fear or anger might temporarily prevent oneself from creative moves, emotions might also be of very good advice to privilege one social representation over another one. Finally, it seems important for people to find the minimal protected space in which these various representations can be considered, imagination exerted, and new synthesis produced.

OPENINGS

In these pages I briefly explored some of the implications of the idea of social representations seen as part of the semiotic process of development, elegantly proposed by Valsiner (2013). Based on examples of people living in complex contexts and moving through spheres of experiences, I tried to highlight aspects of a person's lived situations that might actually bring some conflicting social representations to prevail over others, or to resist them. In order to do so, I draw on Valsiner's uses of biochemical metaphors for the description of semiotic processes. First, the perspective is developmental, and as such, it invites a fully dynamic and historical examination – considering the evolution of contexts, the movement of people through social and material spaces, but also the changeability of social representations and people themselves. From such a perspective, as semiotic units, social representation have, for a given person, different "weight" than others, because they have longer story for him or her – they have a tale and ramifications in the architecture of mind. Second, these social representations might have a positive or negative valence, due to their emotional and embodied roots and prolongations. Third, specific conditions of "natural laboratories" might offer the safe and protected environment for new semiotic work, partly using catalysts and regulators such as uses of symbolic resources and various forms of externalisations. In such conditions, relatively protected from the messiness of the social world, new semiotic realities might be synthesised – and new pathways imagined, against all odds.

Finally, Valsiner's dialogue between social representations studies and a semiotic perspective, discussed in the light of complex empirical cases, might enrich both approaches: it expands social representations theory, by opening the whole avenue of their role in individual trajectories; it deepens semiotic analysis by enriching the understanding of the articulation of multiple social constraints and determinations in the production of semiotic forms.

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