SEMIOTIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF IN MULTICULTURAL SOCIETIES

A THEORY OF PROCULTURATION

Vladimer Lado Gamsakhurdia

Routledge

Semiotic Construction of the Self in Multicultural Societies

Semiotic Construction of the Self in Multicultural Societies elaborates on a holistic theory on the self by integrating in one framework social representation theory, dialogical self theory, and particular ideas from Vygotskyan developmental psychology.

This book sends a humanistic message by indicating the power of inexhaustible human imagination that empowers individuals to strive for knowing the unknown; checking the limits of their abilities and challenging (distancing); and at the same time, affectively and semiotically engaging (undistancing and recreating) their heritage cultures. It provides theoretical elaborations and innovations through the case study of Georgian society, and particular examples of proculturation. The theoretical and empirical explorations of proculturation experiences allow ways of tracing the rebuilding of bridges between psychological and anthropological sciences, paving a path towards transdisciplinary approaches.

This book will be of great interest to academics, researchers, and postgraduate students in the fields of social psychology, semiotics, and multicultural studies.

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A Theory of Proculturation

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To my everything, to my dearest mother, to Gudeda!

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Proculturation: A new synthesis

This book is a contribution to basic social sciences from two border zones. First, the border is that between disciplines—those of developmental science and social psychology of contacts between people from various cultural backgrounds. The traditions of cross-cultural psychology have emphasized the ontology of cultures as collective entities that have inherent appeal for persons from one society to enter into another—and assimilate to its social expectations set by cultural norms. The tradition of acculturation research—dominant in the past half-century—has been built upon that axiomatic basis. That basis involves the assumption that the person coming into the receiving society wants and accepts the social norms of the latter, and becomes similar to all the other members of this society. Not surprisingly, acculturation research has implied one-sided dominance relations between migrants from one society to another—immigrants from Setumaa to Sweden are expected to become Swedish; while Swedish migrants to Setumaa are not expected to become Setu, and learn their language, and begin wearing their colourful national costumes. The notion of integration into the dominant cultural system in a society has been of political interest in the societies that have taken in various waves of immigrants. Social scientists have followed this political demand for knowledge, and have tried to explain under which conditions such "becoming the Other" can happen, and when it fails. And it often does—as the proliferation of Chinatowns all over the world outside China shows. That failure can in fact be productive—dining in London in authentic European or Indian restaurants makes culinary encounters with the historically English metropolitan area interculturally versatile. Wherever cultural traditions meet one another, there are always borders between them that both separate and connect them—at the same time.

The focus on acculturation in the social sciences has been theoretically myopic. It has assumed that the process of adjusting to a new society is that of taking over its cultural tools as they are—overlooking the simple possibility that all societies are developing in their own course of movement from their pasts to their futures. Thus, the so-called "first world" societies are equal

to the so-called "third world" (formerly viewed as "primitive") societies—now labelled as "developing societies", to use a more positive label. It has been more than slightly ironic that dominant Occidental societies such as the United States, Great Britain, Germany, the Holy Roman Empire, and the like—would be considered as "developed"—as if these societies have arrived at the final highest level of economic, social, and political development. As we know from history, if a society stops its further development, it is likely to end up in economic and political collapse—as the histories of the Holy Roman Empire, of its sequel in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and more recently of the Soviet Union—have demonstrated. All societies are developing societies—and it is very often the case that their development is fuelled by the arrival of immigrants from other, less prosperous, yet equally developing societies. Immigrants bring with them cultural novelties—starting from "ethnic cuisines" that infiltrate into traditional cooking practices to produce "fusion cuisine". They enrich the society they come into in multiple ways. And in their adaptation to their "receiving society" they also develop personally, beyond accepting the mores of the society as givens. They lead to restructuring of the societal norm systems—they introduce novelties to the society into which they migrate. This latter feature has been overlooked in the research traditions of acculturation.

There is a simple reason for this overlooking—the ontological assumption behind the acculturation research: societies are, rather than societies become into a new form. Moving over to the latter assumption makes acculturation research developmental, as both societies and persons moving across societies are assumed to develop. Hence the need for a theory of proculturation, as outlined in this book. The focus here is on the constructive synthesis of migrants' pasts in their home societies with their new experiences under new societal conditions. The migration experience makes them develop as persons beyond all the societies they move through (Zittoun, 2007), and the societies are not left as they were through encounters with the incoming outsiders. Thus the young Georgians who move—even temporarily—out of their historically sturdy home country on the Southern side of the Caucasus mountains to Europe or North America do not become similar to the "natives" of their host countries, but learn from them to become world citizens who unite the knowhow of their Occidental studies with the deep historical traditions of their historical home.

This book is a testimony of how the synthesis of cultural traditions happens within migrating persons—and what this means for bringing a developmental science focus to the processes of moving between societies. It gives readers an account of another border zone—that of the cultural and geographical uniqueness of Georgia. Located at the intersection of Europe and the Orient on the one hand, and being in historically ambivalent relations with its Northern and Southern neighbouring empires on the other, Georgia is a

country with deeply engrained, unique cultural traditions that function in our 21st century in great continuity with past centuries. Yet that continuity does not close the society for development—on the contrary, it creates the fertile basis for it. Similarly, the deep devotion to their mothers by young people from Georgia does not make them exclusively bonded, but rather serves as a secure base for exploring the world.

The present book relates ideas from psychological anthropology, cultural history, and cultural psychology. Its author plays an important role in the maintenance of Georgian cultural traditions. He comes from a lineage of Georgian intelligentsia that has, from generation to generation, given flavour to the development of the literary and political traditions of this fiercely independently minded nation. The book is a masterpiece of demonstrating the national creativity of human beings once they move into new roles of international mastery of new knowledge and identities that are both national and cosmopolitan at the same time.

The theory of proculturation introduced in this book makes the focus on social representation processes fundamentally developmental. Bringing the basic notions of developmental science and cultural psychology to the field of acculturation research is a decisive leap forward in the theoretical understanding of the relations of individual human beings and the various societies through which they move within their unique life courses. The newly developed proculturation theory elaborated in this book builds on the dynamic picture of social representations both within a society over its historical changes, and within individual developing minds. It is the open-ended nature of development that is relevant for new theories in the social sciences—and the new theory is based on the classic innovation in developmental logic of persistent imitation (Baldwin, 1906)—imaginative experimentation with novel organization in everyday life. In our ordinary lives we seem to live in the present, but our living in the present is constantly oriented towards the future. We may be assured that tomorrow is in general similar to today—yet inevitably new and unknown before it arrives. We need to be ready for the new—and create it ourselves. Facing the anticipated future in a here-and-now setting with a new form of action is the way to turn the imaginary into the real (Godelier, 2020). This transformation is possible when the unpredictability of the future is turned into the site of personal construction of what is desired for the next present. And what is desired is presented to the construction site by social representations that act as catalysts rather than causes in the developmental processes (Valsiner, 2019). Semiotic mediation of this process builds on society's social representations that create the approximate catalytic conditions under which development of new forms of action proceeds. It is such approximation—rather than precise determination—that creates the arena for flexibility for the future to transcend the existing social order of the given society.

Proculturation is the process of person-based innovation of the society—and through it, of oneself.

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Jaan Valsiner
Chapel Hill, NC
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Acknowledgements

Introduction

This book is about the journeys that humans take in the quest for better futures, or simply because of inexhaustible curiosity; and also about the meaning of extraordinary meetings, thoughts, and emotions that are experienced through intercultural interactions. The theory of proculturation encourages us to look microgenetically on the development of selves and their relations with cultures and societies, in the continuous process of sense-making of their selfhood and identities in multicultural environments and, specifically, in emigration. This book aims to contribute to the re-establishment of the long-lost links between psychological and anthropological sciences by exploring universal regularities of idiosyncratic phenomenological experiences through real or imaginary social mobility (Zittoun, 2020).

Mainstream directions of social sciences, including psychology, are rooted in Cartesian dualism(s), and label human–environment interaction in negativistic terms. The cartesian separation between inner and outer worlds positions persons *against* their environments as if they were substantially separated and distinct entities. Consequently, humans' agency (action/thinking/feelings) is predominantly understood as oriented on adaptation and tuning to their environment. This is not a fitting axiomatic starting point for any approach in the human sciences; following their nature as open systems (Von Bertalanffy, 1986), persons are continually *relating to* their environment, and can develop only through such relationship. Notably, inter-relation between the self and the external world is not always dialogical, but also might be monological where significant external societal voices or positions might inhibit personal aspirations or interpretations.

When people move across various cultural spaces, they meet new semiotic signs and meaning-systems, and face the need to make sense of new conditions in which they occur in emigration. The latter need might be considered as a particular form of adaptive challenge. The process of adaptation can be understood in various ways. The definition of adaptation has been predominantly related to the idea of evolution(ism). Darwin, who remains the most prominent historical figure of evolutionism, indicated the "accidental" nature of survival, which is the primary desired outcome for any species

during "natural selection". In defining adaptation in Darwinian tradition, the accent is placed on the task of adjustment to the given environment, as it is regarded as the main requirement for survival. So, the external world is thought of as an independent external force that living organisms need to adapt to. Darwin would propose that it was not those giraffes that stretched their necks to get food which survived, but only those that already had longer necks by the time the need to reach higher trees arose (Darwin, 1859). This is merely saying that Darwin's "natural selection" leads to the survival not of the smartest and/or strongest, but of the most "appropriate", or even the luckiest of all. That is why dinosaurs became extinct, despite their vast size, as their power became redundant and irrelevant in the Ice Age.

Notably, a Darwinian approach reflected adaptive changes in animals' chemical/physiological, genetic, and physical features, which served the purposes of getting (better) food, improving the function of reproduction, or dealing with particular (physical) environmental conditions (e.g. lack of oxygen in high mountains). These sorts of processes are sufficient to reflect animal adaptation as they are acting predominantly reflexively, without conscious thinking (maybe except chimpanzees). An individual animal does not have the mental capacity to make meaningful changes in the course of ontogenesis. This may lead to the extermination of whole species as they are not able to manage to go beyond inherited patterns of behaviour in response to meaningful changes in their living environments. So, the Darwinian sense of adaptation represents organisms as reactionary and reflexive creatures that are genetically programmed, and act against their environment and changes in it. Thus, his views permanently strip living organisms' ability for intentional reactions on external stimuli at the ontogenetic level of development.

Interestingly, Darwin also distinguished the specific mode of adaptive changes that happen in organisms because of the "laws of growth". The latter implies developmental changes that evolve based on the biological programme of development of species, and is assumed not to have anything to do with changes in the environment. Thus, according to Darwin, not all developments are adaptive, as some result from a specific automatic biological programme of development. The Darwinian approach represents living organisms as conceptually separated from their environments, which "blindly", without the ability for conscious control, follow phylogenetically formed programmes for their ontogenetic development.

Darwinian assumptions might seem reasonable for any other creature, but not for humans, who unlike any other living organisms are the only creatures who can consciously change their thinking/feelings/actions in reaction to environmental challenges, or even without explicit external stimulation. Notably, many meaningful, innovative breakthroughs have been individual achievements made during the single ontogenetic life-course, indicating the potential exceptional flexibility and dynamic developmental nature of humanity. This is why many human languages have an equivalent for the

word "genius", which represents individual brilliance which is very rare, but possible, among human societies.

The Darwinian paradigm of "natural selection" obviously does not reflect the power of human imagination and the nature of humans' lived experiences, which are indissolubly related and rooted in the sociocultural environment. A reconsideration of traditional views on human adaptation is due, as it is a much more sophisticated process then animals' "natural selection". These questions could be efficiently addressed in terms of the theory of cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics (Valsiner, 2007, 2014) and dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992). In the former, the question of adaptation becomes resolved by way of explicating dynamic hierarchies of signs that regulate person–environment relations. In the latter, the adaptation question is dealt with through distancing and undistancing of I-positions.

Towards "organic selection"

At the dawn of the psychological sciences, somewhere around the end of the 19th century, Baldwin proposed an alternative to the Darwinian approach, in the form of the idea of "organic selection" to reflect the dynamics of the evolutionary process (Valsiner, 2017a). There are various interpretations of particular components of his theory; however, I will concentrate only on those aspects of his model that are directly relevant to our purpose and are widely accepted. According to Valsiner (2017a), Baldwin's effect implies the possibility of innovation throughout ontogenetic development. "Persistent innovation" is the crucial term for understanding the Baldwinian sense of change. According to the latter, children and adults not only directly accept the knowledge provided by their sociocultural environments, but also are able to reconstruct it through the process of internalization. "Persistent imitation is an act of reconstruction of a model given" (Valsiner, 2017a).

Moreover, Baldwin laid the foundation for developmental approaches by introducing the idea of "circular reactions", which indicates that each reaction is a stimulus for the next response. Circular reactions lead to consecutive innovative dynamics. Baldwin emphasized the social origin of developmental dynamics and overcame the static perception of the self. He represented humans as being continually in development through relating to others. Unfortunately, Baldwin's ideas, which were well ahead of his time, were forgotten for a long time until their recent re-actualization in the frame of cultural psychological circles.

People are more than just information-processing systems, as conceived by cognitivist approaches (Bruner, 1990, 2002)—they have a distinctive capacity for creativity which is fundamentally based on their meaning-making abilities. Humans not only process and react to information provided externally, but can produce meanings/significations and feelings about their experiences and

memories (Valsiner, 2014). People do not merely accumulate knowledge by accepting and mechanically adding bits of information to each other, but engage in a meaningful dialogue with the inter-objective and intersubjective systems of signs. From early childhood, people are becoming acquainted with the historically formed elements of symbolic systems, and interpret (from "interpretant" in the Peircean sense) their knowledge and experiences in relation to their particular context and based on their position in it. Moreover, technological developments/breakthroughs and transformations of the material and practical aspects of the living environment represent additional catalytic conditions that back-influence the process of the reconsideration of existing representations. Consequently, each piece of information and artefact obtains a personal sense for the self, which is the basis for inter-individual variety. So, meaningful experiences/artefacts are interpreted and reconsidered through personal (ontogenetic) and historical development (Vygotsky, 1994) that leads to innovation from generation to generation (Cole, 1996; Valsiner, 2014).

We should further distinguish information from meanings (and the personal sense, in the Vygotskyan approach), as the ability to produce meanings distinguishes people from all other living organisms. Animals communicate to signal information about sexual arousal, danger or safety; however, this process is instinctive and never subjective. An individual animal chooses the best partner for reproduction automatically, based on instinctual evaluation of physical traits of potential mates, and will always want a mate that is stronger and better equipped to provide safety and "better genes"—animals would never be able to have romantic relations or fall in love with a mate that is physically or otherwise weak (whereas that is not unusual for humans). So, animals are operating by instinctive totalities of elaborated evolutionary modules of reflexes, and are always "rational", whereas people subjectively construct meanings and personal sense (for the definition of "personal sense" see Vygotsky, 1994), which are imbued with feelings. Notably, not all of humans' behaviours directly serve the purpose of survival. Emotions, on the other hand, are constructed according to meanings that are attributed to particular experiences and objects. Human semiosis is affective (Tateo, 2016, 2018a; Valsiner, 2000, 2013), while affections are semiotically fed. Each act of feeling implies the establishment of personal relations (positive, negative or ambivalent) to objects or experiences. Feeling itself is the fact of signification (e.g. the experience is positive or negative) and is constructed based on past experiences of signifying and relating to the particular perceivable object, and also in relation to relevant anticipations. Affective reactions, by nature, are never accidental or improvised, but are the revelations of constructive processes of personal positioning in the heterogeneous world of meanings and signs, which have a historical and sociocultural origin. The meaning which the object has for the self defines his/her affective reaction to it. Without having meaning, there is no possibility of the appearance of affections.

Affective processes are constructed through, and in parallel with, semiosis. We could even say that affection is the aspect of objects' semiotic processing. The personal sense is what causes different affective reactions to the same objects or experiences. For example, a broken fridge magnet from a small Basque village might be sacredly precious to one person due to the personal story of who is associated with that object, while another person might be indifferent to it. It is also possible that an object or experience may cause neutral (zero) affective reaction; however, in that case, that new experience will be regarded as merely another piece of information, not a meaning. So, any theory of human adaptation should reflect affectively charged subjectivity and the ability of agentive semiosis.

Notably, humans are not necessarily confined in their immediate temporal or spatial environments, and are able to go beyond them to employ their imagination (Tateo, 2015). People interpret their experiences based on their expectations and future goals. Human thinking, feelings, and actions are catalytically conditioned by hopes, desires, fears, anxieties, and any other feelings or thoughts that are related and/or projected on the future time. Even the historical past is often interpreted based on people's goals.

Towards a systemic theory of the self and culture

Our argument leads us to the necessity to consider the systemic nature of humans and their sociocultural systems. Such figures as Von Bertalanffy (1950, 1986) and Weiss have constructed theories of systems (Drack, Apfalter, & Pouvreau, 2007). However, their views were inspired by various elaborations on system theory that have had a century-long, complicated history in physics, biology, and other human sciences. We can find roots of "systemic thinking" in Aristotle's claim about the primacy of wholeness against fragmented views: "the whole is of necessity before the part" (Aristotle, 1920). In the more recent past, Max Planck made it clear that it is impossible to grasp all features of physical objects unless considering them in their entirety (Drack et al., 2007). Several ideas that lie at the roots of a systemic approach will be considered. First is the assumption that the unity of interrelated elements obtains additional features that do not characterize them if they occur beyond that relational structure. As Driesch indicated, organic living systems are characterized by "wholeness causality" that is driven by a common organizational goal, and even if a particular element is detached from the system, it will still tend to realize that objective and regenerate the structure. Driesch, in his experiment, separated cells and observed that each of them still formed an entire larva in any event (Driesch, 1899). Von Bertalanffy criticized mechanism, and indicated that scholars should study not separate elements, but the structure of their relations, in order to understand a systemic dynamics that is non-reducible to its components: "wholeness (*Ganzheit), Gestalt*, is the primary attribute of life" (Von Bertalanffy, 1950).

The systemic approach allows challenging Cartesian mechanicism, which represents parts of the system as substantially isolated from each other, and draws information concerning the whole by means of studying its elements separately/individually. Human adaptation should be understood as a systemic process that involves humans and their environments not as separate entities, but as interrelated phenomena.

Moreover, Cartesian mechanicism implicates the idea of direct deterministic causality, where A causes B and represents organisms as reactive creatures. This does not make any sense in terms of the systematic organization of elements, where it is the relational structure of elements that defines the meaning of the process. Weiss's experiments with butterflies showed that no single factor (light or gravity) could predict/determine butterflies' movements single-handedly, but their entirety-combination (Drack et al., 2007). Regarding human psychology, we can assume that there is no such factor that can unilaterally define the thinking/feelings/behaviour of people, neither inner (genetic) nor external (cultural) ones. The self is an open system which is indissolubly engaged in a dialogue with a sociocultural environment.

Notably, components of any system are hierarchically organized and teleological (Von Bertalanffy, 1950, 1986). Human systems are characterized by epigenetic development, which leads to the hierarchizations of differentiated elements. Some elements are taking meta-positions inside the self-system, while they control other subsystems. The meaning of I-positions defines its hierarchical place in relation to different positions. Von Bertalanffy assumed that systems live in a flux equilibrium. However, that idea can be questioned as humans are living in relative tension and ambiguity throughout their whole lives—complete peace of semiotic mind is hardly ever achieved. Marsico and Tateo introduced the concept of "tensegrity" (Marsico & Tateo, 2017), which more adequately reflects the condition of dynamic stability that characterizes human beings. Breaking the equilibrium is the way to innovation, and is part of human life.

Disequilibrium and rupturing experiences that happen during meetings with unknown cultural elements create the necessity of proculturation, which may be regarded as a specific mode/field of self-centred process of adaptation that involves the imaginative totality of higher mental processes, and allows the reflection of phenomenological aspects of the process. The exploration of proculturative experiences will allow consideration of the self's relation to systematically organized sociocultural systems and societies.

This book aims to elaborate on the subtleties of the semiotic construction of the self in relation to external symbolic systems, and to illustrate developmental trajectories of proculturative processes by looking at them through microgenetic lenses.

The book consists of two parts. The first part involves theoretical discussions concerning the self, social representations, culture, and their interrelations. In addition, the first part consists of an elaboration of the theory of

proculturation. Chapters 1 and 2 serve as an introduction to the theoretical grounds of the theory of proculturation, and are dedicated to exploring the nature of the semiotic dynamics of the self's construction and its systematically organized interrelations with social representations. More concretely, Chapter 1 traces the origins and basic theoretical assumptions that lie at the basis of the classic versions of the theory of social representations. Social representations are considered as semiotic resources that might be used for cognitive orientation in certain sociocultural spaces and to regulate their affective processes. Social representations are regarded as dynamic semiotic structures that might have two main modes of existence. They represent historically constructed meaning systems, and have dyadic semiotic structures when they are in silent mode. In the latter condition, social representations do not have the power of agency unless activated by individuals who create interpretants (in the Peircean sense) based on their interpretation, which transforms them into triadic semiotic structures and thus involves them in self-related dynamics.

Chapter 2 includes the further development of dialogical theories on the self in relation to the cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics. The latter endeavour leads to further theoretical differentiation of the elements of the self-structure and the hierarchical structure of the self. Namely, the terms of I-position are distinguished from voices, as the former are considered as idiosyncratic semiotic self-related constructs (interpretants in Peircean terms), the latter as vocalizers of certain real or imaginary agents. Voices might vocalize narratives not only about the self, but also about any matter, or might not have any position at all concerning specific themes. The importance of "real physical communication" with physically externally present interlocutors is also emphasized, as it is necessary for avoiding the trap of solipsism and remembering that humans live not only in their imaginary world, but also in relation with real "others" in the actual physical environment. The self evolves through familiarizing and distancing from voices and positions. The plurality of positions and voices is organized by meta-positioning processes which are signified by hyper-generalized signs. The position of a hyper-generalized sign might be served by appropriated social representations that relate a person to historically formed sociocultural symbolic systems. However, social representations can take mate-positioning power only if they are highly affectively charged (so, they cause strong feelings). Most importantly, the emphasis is on the intransitive nature of the hierarchical organization of I-positions and voices as particular positions/voices might have a dominant position in one situational and temporal context, but might be inferior in another condition.

Chapter 3 is the place where the theory of proculturation entirely unfolds. It is compared to the relative terms of acculturation and accommodation, and their distinctive features are highlighted. Piaget's "accommodation" serves for information processing and further differentiation of cognitive categories