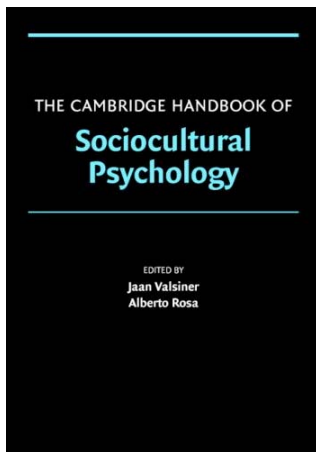


# Book Review

## The Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology

Edited by Jaan Valsiner and Alberto Rosa  
Cambridge University Press, New York, 2007

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It is a very difficult and exciting task to account for the content of a book such as the *Cambridge Handbook of Sociocultural Psychology*. Indeed, the challenge of a handbook is generally that of addressing scholars and students by representing the state-of-the-art of a research field. However, this *Handbook* seems to have a higher target. It contains 35 chapters by 59 different authors, covering almost all the topics of contemporary psychology – such as language, cognition, the relationship between theory and methodology, the concepts of identity, culture, representation, and Self, only to mention some – by the light of sociocultural psychology, whose main concern is to understand the relationship between mind and culture, between individual psychology and social functioning.

Beyond all different versions of social, psychological or physiological reductionism, sociocultural psychology, as drawn by the editors and the authors of the *Handbook*, is arguing today that «social and cultural life are indissociable from the threads which make up the fabric of the human Psyche» (p. ix). This sounds like an old-fashioned statement, and from some point of view it re-proposes the way in which «the very forefathers of Psychology» (p. ix) conceived the basic intertwine between social and psychological phenomena against reductionism. Thus, to understand the editors' claim we can easily go back to 1860 to find an example in Carlo Cattaneo's statement that «the most social act of human beings is thinking» (Cattaneo 2000, p. 89, *my translation*). Later on, Wundt recognized that «the material aspects of the world culture exerted an influence upon the mental aspects, whose direct expressions are speech and writing» (Wundt 1916, p. 486). Reductionism was a sworn enemy also for Lurja, claiming for a «romantic science» able to grasp the richness and the complexity of the «living totality» (Lurja 1979).

However, the failure of social sciences in pursuing the very knowledge of human nature was already clear during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Jahoda 2007). As Murchinson complained:

The social sciences at the present moment stand naked and feeble in the midst of the political uncertainty in the world [...] And at the end of all these centuries, no one knows what is wrong with the world or what is likely to happen in the world. (Murchinson 1935, p. ix)

The answer to this malaise, passed through the decades, is the «result of various historical dialogues within psychology, sociology, and anthropology» (p. 3).

The common features of the scientific threads converging towards a sociocultural view of human Psyche are the focus on interaction, language and semiosis, the holistic concept of

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human beings, the role of human activity in shaping both social and individual world, and the attention to historical and processual nature of human facts.

The *Handbook* is structured in seven main sections providing the point of view of sociocultural psychology on the above mentioned dimensions. The authors draw a network of pathways crossing the psychological landmark of human beings. The first section (*Theoretical and methodological issue*) presents some major theoretical and methodological issues, such as explanation, time and causality direction in social sciences and how it affects the delimitation of phenomena, and the link between theory formulation and empirical research. The second section (*From nature to culture*) presents several reflections on the biological and phylogenetic roots of human Psyche with respect to the culture. The third section (*From orientation to meaning*) moves towards the specificity of human nature, that is, the ability to use signs to build the cultural world from perception, motor exploration and action. This ability to manage symbolic resources to build the Self and the identity within a given social contexts is the focus of the fourth section (*From orientation to meaning*). The fifth (*From society to the person through culture*) and sixth (*From social culture to personal culture*) sections widen the perspective by taking into account the relationship between the individual and the society: a movement going backwards and forwards from society to the person and from social culture to personal culture. Finally, the seventh section (*Making sense of the past for the future: memory and Self-reflection*) deals with the diachronic dimension of mind and culture describing how «collective and personal memory functions are intricately linked» (p. 16).

The overall impression provided by the *Handbook* is a rich and interesting endeavour to reread the whole of psychological knowledge by challenging some assumptions that the mainstream psychology has too quickly taken for granted. As the editors claim: «researchers are explorers, not caravaneers» (p. x).

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#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editors' introduction.

Part I. Theoretical and Methodological Issues:

1. The myth and beyond: ontology of psyche and epistemology of psychology;
2. Language, cognition, subjectivity - a dynamic constitution;
3. Psychology within time: theorizing about the making of sociocultural psychology;



4. Sampling reconsidered: idiographic science and analysis of personal life trajectories;
- Part II. From Nature to Culture:
5. The windowless room: 'mediationism' and how to get over it;
  6. Functional systems of perception-action and re-mediation;
  7. Comparative development of communication: an evolutionary perspective;
  8. The material practices of ape language research;
  9. The end of myths and legends about biological and cultural evolution: a new view in the knowledge on hominid paleo-ethoecology;
- Part III. From Orientation to Meaning:
10. Acts of psyche: actuations as synthesis of semiosis and action;
  11. Time and movement in symbol formation;
  12. Object use, communication and signs: the triadic basis of early cognitive development;
  13. Network of meanings: a theoretical-methodological perspective for the investigation of human developmental processes;
- Part IV. Symbolic Resources for the Constitution of Experience:
14. Dramaturgical actuations and symbolic communication, or how beliefs make up reality;
  15. Analysis of cultural emotion: understanding of indigenous psychology for universal implications;
  16. The role of symbolic resources in human lives;
  17. Perpetual uncertainty of cultural life: becoming reality;
  18. Prayer and the kingdom of heavens: psychological tools for directivity;
  19. 'Myself, the project': sociocultural interpretations of young adulthood;
- Part V. From Society to the Person through Culture:
20. Apprenticeship in conversation and culture: emerging sociability in preschool peer talk;
  21. The creation of new cultures in peer interaction;
  22. 'Culture has no internal territory': culture as dialogue;
  23. Cultural-historical approaches to designing for development;
  24. Money as a cultural tool mediating personal relationships: child development of exchange and possession;
  25. The family: negotiating cultural values;
- Part VI. From Social Culture to Personal Culture:
26. Culture and social representations;
  27. The institutions inside: self, morality and culture;
  28. Identity, rights and duties: the illustrative case of positioning by Iran, the United States and the European Union;
  29. Symbolic politics and cultural symbols: identity formation between and beyond nations and states;
  30. The dialogical self: social, personal, and (un)conscious;
- Part VII. Making Sense of the Past for the Future: Memory and Self-Reflection:
31. Social and cognitive determinants of collective memory for public events;
  32. Collective memory;
  33. Issues in the sociocultural study of memory: making memory matter;
  34. The social basis of self-reflection; General conclusions.

