

The Synthetic and Syncretic Nature of Human Culture

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Abstract The inaugural issue represents a specimen of the project Human Arenas intends to promote: the interdisciplinary study of higher psychological functions in human goal-oriented liminal phenomena, both in ordinary and extraordinary life conditions. The construction of generalized knowledge about human culture can be developed only through a pluralistic, polyphonic, syncretic, innovative, passionate and collective contribution. We present the aim and scientific project of the journal, briefly tell the history of its genesis and its editorial policy. Afterwards, we discuss the epistemological and methodological principles we intend to promote. Finally we present the content and meaning of the published articles.

Keywords Cultural psychology · Syncretic and synthetic · Human arenas · Epistemology · Methodology

Introduction

It is time to overcome the Darwinian attitude of psychology and social sciences. That is, scientific research is not a struggle or competition between opposing views that strive to prevail and occupy academic niches. Instead, it is time to promote “synthetic” and “syncretic” social sciences. “Syncretism” is an epistemological stance that is never rejecting any emerging or potential new idea because it belongs to a different “specie” or “perspective.” It is never hegemonic, it is on the contrary open to the construction of knowledge through the complementarity of views (Tateo and Marsico 2014), rather than the comparison of equally subjugated perspectives against a golden standards, as it often happens in cross-cultural approaches. “Synthetism” is the idea that the meaning of any scientific proposition must be

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understood in its relating to the world. These two principles imply the rebuttal of any “monological” epistemology (Marková 2016), and the development of an arena in which the polyphony of perspectives can lead to a rich epistemic orchestration. This also implies the risk that instead of a harmony, of developing epistemologies, one can listen to a cacophony, of irreconcilable dogmatisms and interpretations based on endless accumulation of data.

In other words, what we are suggesting as a new arena for human inquiries is an epistemology that resonates with its object of knowledge, to the extent that social sciences are part of the very same arena. Indeed, realities of human living are themselves characterized by a similar “synthetic” and “syncretic” nature. Human phenomena take place in “arenas” where complementary and (often) opposing views are at stake, where the human beings make their personal synthesis of syncretically coordinated “processes of creating, managing, demolishing and rebuilding” (Tateo 2017, p. 214) meanings about themselves and the world (Innis 2016). Besides, human phenomena are always purposeful and involved in developmental dynamics (Marsico 2015), that require a constant tension “toward”. Even when trying to maintain a *status quo*, humans perform a type of restless agency. Any doing (or not doing) is indeed producing new meanings. Thus, what we are promoting is a “syncretic” and “synthetic” epistemology—with its related methodology (Valsiner 2017a)—which is functionally equivalent with the world it aims to understand.

A New Interdisciplinary Journal for New Meanings

Human Arenas is the journal that promotes a truly interdisciplinary study of higher psychological functions in human goal-oriented liminal phenomena, both in ordinary and extraordinary life conditions. The concept of “human arena” is made of two different terms. By “human” we intend to stress the focus on the subject as meaning-maker, yet we are not bound to any anthropocentric perspective. We do not think that humans have a kind of privileged position with respect to other beings, rather than we cannot help starting from our own epistemic perspective—with all its limits and resources—be aware of the relationship with Otherness (Simão 2016) and open to develop multi-perspectivist epistemology (Guimarães and Simão 2017). Yet, we also acknowledge that the definition of “what” and “who” is “human” is subject to historical changes and it is a matter of study in itself. By “arena” we mean a chronotope (Bakhtin 1981) of symbolic (material) collective activities, characterized by some specific features. First, the arena is a place in which humans experience their personal version of “public” phenomena—in a similar sense to the context of activity—or in which the personal experience can be partially shared as different degrees of “public” meaning—as for instance in the case of marital relationships or in social media. Second, an arena is characterized by multiple voices or perspectives—sometimes conflicting, sometimes cooperating, and sometimes dilemmatic—that are internalized and externalized—in other words, they are personalized—by the different actors. Finally, the metaphor of arena implies that some can play an active role, while others can be spectators. Yet these roles can at any time emerge and dissolve or reverse, according to specific conditions, as parts of open systemic organization.

The journal explores the “human arenas” from the point of view of the historical foundations, methodology, and epistemology at the intersection of different disciplines. This requires an innovative mix of theoretical and empirical studies, of qualitative and quantitative approaches based on “small data.” Instead of academically confined ideas that proliferate through inductive accumulation of large empirical “evidence” in the comfort zone of each single discipline, we need the analysis of key, crucial, and meaningful data from multiple angles.

The contemporary arena of academic publishing in social and human sciences is characterized by the flourishing of sectarian publication media and the quantification of knowledge-representation (IF, H-index, etc.), that demand “groundbreaking” contributions to the “literature,” an ill-defined semantic field, bounded by reduced heterogeneity in the development of new ideas and a within rigidity of field by “border controllers” (rejection rate, etc.). If I take the “Journal of cognitive studies in special educational needs in English as second language learning in North Korean primary schools”, after reading a couple of articles, I will probably have got the fundamental ideas and findings. The next article will not add any interesting new idea or theoretical advancement but laborious minimum empirical accumulation, that will basically constitute confirmation of what I am already expecting. If I read instead an interdisciplinary journal in which different perspectives hybridize, I will have more opportunities to develop innovative ideas. Still, the former journal will probably have a higher in-bred IF. Human Arenas is precisely focused on cultivating what is not-yet-literature, but will potentially become the ideas of the future.

Cultivating Ideas

Human Arenas had a quite long gestational phase. It was conceived in Crete (Greece), one of the cradles of Western civilization. We were there attending a conference when we received the information about the interest of Springer to receive a proposal for a new journal. We challenged ourselves to make a proposal with a mix of excitement and awe. Traveling on the bus from the conference to the Crete airport, we were already sending to Springer the most visionary ideas that came to our minds. It had to be a journal never seen before or nothing. Afterwards, the clarification of the editorial project was nourished by our visits to Brazil, USA, and Japan, where we were confronted with the “synthetic” and “syncretic” nature of human culture. In particular, Japanese aesthetics and philosophy inspired also the lacquered white and red cover. The journal proposal went through a long evaluation process. To establish a new publication is a matter of complex decision-making, in which the publisher considers some crucial factors as the potential of filling a market gap, the potential return on investments, and an estimate of the impact and penetration of the new journal in a specific field. Besides, as editors, we did not have any foundation, scientific association or “brand” behind us, that could guarantee reaching a target audience. We could only rely on our ideas “out of the box,” that won in the very end.

A journal is thus the result of an industrious and committed work of *cultivation*. In the same vein, we intend to promote an innovative editorial policy. We will not indulge in any sadistic and unproductive pleasure for having a high rejection rate, as hallmark of the scientific quality of our journal. We firmly believe, instead, that our task as editors is that of developing a new policy. We want to introduce in the scientific publishing market the new concept of *cultivation rate*. We will measure the success of our endeavor not by the number of article we will reject, but by *the number of ideas we will help to develop* and by *the number of young researchers that we will support* in innovating interdisciplinary studies of higher psychological functions. We will not maintain the closed borders of our “kitchen garden,” but we will promote a systematic interdisciplinary dialogue. No article will be rejected because it does not “fit,” or it is “too much X” or “not enough Y.” The guidelines of our editorial and peer-review policy, shared with all our collaborators, are to support and to co-develop ideas with our authors. This does not mean to abdicate the quest for a rigorous and solid scientific grounding of ideas.

Indeed, one of the scientific principles of Human Arenas is that of expanding the horizons of psychology, both in the sense of latitude—by opening it to the dialogue with all the other disciplines—and in the sense of longitude—by widening the temporal horizon of the research within the history of ideas.

A Scientific Project

Even though Human Arenas is an open and hybrid journal, it represents the outcome of a specific and innovative scientific project going on in the area of cultural psychology and developed among the worldwide network, that has the Niels Bohr Centre for Cultural Psychology at Aalborg University as its main hub. Such general approach to a new science of human beings (Valsiner et al. 2016) is based on some fundamental principles. First of all, phenomena must be acknowledged as wholes, constituting open systems in their temporal flow. Second, social sciences shall focus on processes rather than outcomes. An effective theoretical model shall in fact be able to account for processes beyond the observation of a specific outcome. For instance, any theory of learning shall be able to explain both learning and absence of learning (Marsico and Tateo 2017). This leads to the third principle: the formation of concepts in psychology must be able to account for the whole composed by a triadic set (“A” + “non-A” + “distinction”) emerging as a whole, according to a cogenetic approach (Tateo 2016). Any element of a phenomenon is part of a whole— an open system—and it is co-defined by both the other sub-parts of the unique system and the exchange relations with its environment (Valsiner 2017a). In the study of social relationships, for instance, one cannot understand the construction of group identity without considering the formation of non-group identity and the process through which a distinction is produced, who can produce it and how it is maintained and modified over time. A theory, which is not able to account for this as a whole, is strongly limited in its heuristic power.

The last principle considers science as a collective enterprise and has direct implications both on epistemology and methodology (Valsiner 2017a). Despite academic context often cultivates a highly narcissistic attitude, scholars still work, discuss, share, and coordinate efforts to grasp the ever-changing and unique nature of human phenomena. While the issue of authorship is relevant only for the academic bureaucracy, the complementarity of gazes also multiplies the qualities and the features of the field of investigation (Wagoner et al. 2014).

The Problem of Origins

Any intellectual endeavor that over the centuries aimed to explore the general topic of human existence—for instance, in the West, by Aristotle, Vico, Baumgarten, and Kant (Klempe 2017; Jovanović 2017), yet any cultural tradition has its own thinkers—needs to restart from the fundamental critic of the origins. The general system of knowledge about human nature needs to deal up with three fundamental problems:

- 1) the problem of the genesis of existence (metaphysics);
- 2) the problem of the genesis of knowledge (epistemology);
- 3) the problem of the genesis of what is specifically “human” (anthropology) (Corbey 2005).

Social sciences tend nowadays to collapse this complex articulation into a statistical epistemology and a “physiological metaphysics.” Even though, unconsciously they are still struggling with the problem of origins as—for instance—evolutionary psychology *de facto* does.

Human Arenas has the ambition to be the place where intellectuals can develop a dialogue and a collective scientific project about the general systems of knowledge. We intended thus to start by an arena about the critic of origins. Any developmental approach soon or later deals with the problem of origins (how processes begin: sociogenetically, ontogenetically, etc.). At the same time, any social ideology is basically a retrospective set of assumptions about the origins and justification of the present and future states. So, the topic of origins has an epistemological, social, political, and psychological relevance at the same time.

In the first section of this inaugural issue, Alan Rayner presents his project of “natural inclusionality,” that aims at articulating in a non-reductive way the metaphysical, epistemological, and anthropological dimensions, toward an unified system of natural and human sciences. We share the idea that the challenge of future sciences will be to overcome any form of reductionism and be able to articulate, rather than subjugating, the biological, the organismic, and social into a dynamic systemic view. In the second article, Luke Whaley develops natural inclusionality logic as a potential epistemological turn in social sciences. The work method of science would no longer be only that of creating classifications and distinctions, yet more to understand (inter)relations and dynamics in terms of inclusive separations and tensional integrity between parts of open systems (Marsico and Tateo 2017; Valsiner 1987). This innovative view has profound implications also for the ethics of research. Claiming that phenomena are constituted by systems of individualized/bounded elements deeply redefines the subject/object relationships. The researcher and her object are at the same time distinct organisms yet bounded by a systemic relation. We become, or already are, part of what we come to know. Different epistemological positions do claim the possibility of the complete subject/object alterity also in social sciences as requirement for “objective” knowledge. We instead promote the idea that one can never speak “on behalf of” some “research object,” because when we speak about something we say something about ourselves in the first place. This is what started with the decolonizing movement in social sciences (Apffel-Marglin et al. 1996), yet after liberation from the power of mainstream discourse must come the awareness of the interdependency of polyphonic discourses. This is exemplified by the article of Jeffrey Firewalker Schmitt, who presents a different tradition of ecological, biological, and social organization developed by Andean cultures. By understanding phenomena not in terms of dualities and mutual exclusions, rather in terms of inclusionality and mutual relationships, the study of Andean cultures’ cosmologies, ethics, and anthropologies suggest new emerging approaches in social sciences.

Education is the fundamental activity that constitutes the human being as both an individual and a part of a system of relationship. One can understand education as a complementary process of individuation and socialization, of knowledge construction and deconstruction of previous beliefs (Valsiner 2017a). In the fourth article of this section, Eva Vass deals up with one of the most classical dualities: the mind/body problem in development. Based on Rayner’s receptive-responsive disposition that characterizes organisms in natural-inclusional systems, she shows how children learning is strongly built on embodied experience. The body is at the same time what distinguishes us as individuals and makes us parts of the environment. In this sense, it is the first personal arena of inclusive separation (Valsiner 1987) and becomes one of the most fundamental epistemic places (Tanaka 2015).

The connection between the first and second section of this inaugural issue is marked by a “Coffe Break”: a new format of academic writing meant to repropose small excerpts of classical texts commented and expanded in order to identify their still active potential to generate new research ideas. This time, we decided to remind the 50th anniversary of Pitirim A. Sorokin’s death, the Russian sociologist and founder of the first Harvard’s sociology laboratory. Although somehow forgotten, Sorokin’s ideas informed for a long life social sciences and still make his intellectual efforts worthy of a careful analysis in our time. Sorokin developed sociological principles for understanding the changes of sociocultural systems. Emiliana Mangone makes an important contribution to a new look at Sorokin’s ideas. She presents Sorokin *Integral* perspective, that conceives the change of any sociocultural phenomena as the result of the combined external and internal forces. She chooses to illustrate Sorokin’s idea through the specific and topical problem of “disasters” events in human societies. This topic allows her to illustrate the articulation of biological, psychological, and sociological levels in Sorokin’s work, as well as the epistemology that enables social sciences to understand these relations.

The second part brings into focus the specific epistemological issues of the origins of knowledge in psychological sciences. The article of Pablo Fossa presents the ideas of Oswald Külpe, who—in a typical kind of reflection of the early times of psychology—discusses the metaphysical and epistemological problem of the nature of reality. This is a good example of how current research in psychology must be grounded in deep and critical philosophical reflections. According to Fossa, for instance, one of the lines of tension is represented by the absence of temporality and focus on localism of psychological functions in neuroscience research, opposed to the emphasis on the transformation, process in movement and permanent development from first person perspective in approaches such as phenomenology and cultural psychology.

We can add that the conception of *reality* is still topical, to the extent that epistemologies of being and becoming are providing different viewpoints on phenomena and on the levels of analysis (Valsiner 2008). For instance, current affective neurosciences refer to fMRI scanning experiments as studies that “visualize” phenomena like “empathy,” “love,” “aggressiveness” while they happen in real-time in the brain. This is a rhetorical leap that signals a poor articulation between the different levels of organization (electro-chemical, biological, psychological, social) (Valsiner 2017b). What is observed is the momentary alteration of hemodynamic response due to the different use of energy by brain cells detected through magnetic response of hydrogen atoms. So, any attempt to jump from this level to the description of complex affective states is ignoring that “empathy” is a word of English language—created by Titchener and uncertain translation of the original German word “Einfühlung”—the people make meaning of, according to their personal interpretation of a collectively coordinated activity. Left out that any ordinary brain can “know” the etymology of empathy, the reductionist move is paradoxically showing the meaning-making process of neurosciences. The intellectual project of Human Arenas, will instead be that of articulating the dialogue, with the goal of developing bridges, rather than leaps, between the different perspectives and levels of analysis of *reality* in psychology.

The topic of perspectives comes back in Alaric Kohler’s article on *perspectivist epistemology*. Starting from the critical discussion of Piaget’s genetic epistemology and Grize’s natural logic, Kohler promotes the idea that knowledge emerges from the coordination of different perspectives about a common object of interest. The *perspectivist epistemology* works in ordinary life of developing children, as showed by Piaget and Grize. Yet according to Kohler, this must be also a

knowledge creation tool in “ordinary life” of scientists. Kohler’s article closes the circle of the inaugural issue, that represents a specimen of the project Human Arenas intends to promote. The construction of generalized knowledge about human culture can be developed only through a pluralistic, polyphonic, syncretic, innovative, passionate, and collective contribution.

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