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# *Report on Cultural Psychology: A new science of the human nature, Yokohama 2016*

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## **Abstract**

This is a review of the symposium "Cultural Psychology: A new science of the human nature", which took place at the International Conference of Psychology (ICP) in Yokohama in 2016. The symposium was a collaborative effort of the editors and authors of the "Yokohama Manifesto" and its main goal was to make the ideas in this Manifesto known to a wider audience. There were five groups of authors and co-authors who presented their findings in different areas of the developing field of cultural psychology in short talks, and five discussants commenting on their respective findings.

**Keywords :** Cultural psychology; Human nature; Yokohama Manifesto.

The symposium was organized by Jaan Valsiner and Giuseppina Marsico, who are also two of the five editors of the integrated anthology *Psychology as the Science of Human Being - The Yokohama Manifesto* (Valsiner *et al.*, 2016). This book was accurately described in the opening remarks of the symposium by Valsiner as "an international collective effort to make the study of specifically human ways of being the centre of psychological science". To further enhance this effort Valsiner and Marsico invited various groups of co-authors who contributed to that book (disclosure: the author of this review was one of them<sup>1</sup>) to present their latest findings, ideas and research related to the ideas put forth in the book, in a short talk at the ICP 2016. Five other contributors served as discussants of these wide varied talks. As is obvious from the subtitle of the book, one central goal of the symposium was to promote this "Manifesto of Cultural Psychology" and to explore the future directions in this field. Cultural psychology starts from the basic premise that an individual human being's

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<sup>1</sup> My attendance at the International Conference of Psychology 2016 in Yokohama was supported by a travel expense grant by the GSK (GlaxoSmithKline) foundation.

experience and behaviour is rooted in and an expression of the diverse cultural traditions and contexts this individual is living with(in). The Manifesto seems to enrich this general concept by stressing the higher level organisational processes and activities of human beings, which are understood as hierarchically organised open systems trying to determine and develop themselves the best they can in their respective environments and in relationship with their fellow beings. This holistic systems theoretical outlook is the methodological grounds on which these higher level psychological, specifically human ways of being are deemed as having their own irreducible nature, different from purely biological, i.e. physiological, genetic or neurological facts of the matter.

The sheer number of active participants, quite exceptional even for a symposium, in itself was proof of the vitality of the relatively young field and served to show the multiple, but interconnected ideas cultural psychologists are currently working on. The symposium was also well visited, drawing an audience of over fifty interested listeners. Probably this was also due to the fact that the Manifesto book had already been published in Springer's book series "Annals of Theoretical Psychology" before the conference. However, this definitely made it easier for interested listeners in the audience to delve deeper into the various subjects right after the event, simply by acquiring the book. The presentations were reiterations as well as enhancements of the main ideas in some of the many different chapters of the Manifesto book and were about the following topics:

- 1) Importance of history of psychology: From Ganzheit to new theoretical horizons. (Brady Wagoner, Hroar Klempe, and Sergio Salvatore)
- 2) Unity of the real and the non-real: Imagination in action and talk. (Luca Tateo and Lene Tanggaard)
- 3) Understanding Human Being Within the Framework of William Stern's Critical Personalism: Teleology, Holism, and Valuation. (Kolja Lehmann-Muriithi, James Lamiell, and Carolina de Resende Damas Cardoso)

- 4) Psychology and art: Conceptual and methodological intersections. (Olga Lehmann, Vlad Petre Glaveanu, Svend Brinkmann, and Mark Freeman)
- 5) Variety of love: Multiverses in a localism aesthetic (Koji Komatsu and Maria Elisa Molina Pavez)

The discussants were Tatsuya Sato, Kevin Carriere, Rebekka Mai Eckerdal, Jensine Ingerslev Nedergaard, and Yasuhiro Omi, who each shared their thoughts on these five talks immediately after the last presentation.

As can be seen from the titles, the talks were quite diverse in the scope of their topics. One focal point was the reactivation of the historical theoretical concept of “Ganzheit” or whole in 1) - where wholes were characterized as feeling based, developing totalities of experience, and demonstrated in relation to how objects come to be perceived as real and to the construction of memories - and in 3) – where William Stern’s teleologic holistic thinking was historically situated, with particular emphasis on the compatibility of his views with humanistic thinking more generally and with the investigative methods of phenomenology. Other core areas were the behavioural and methodological role of imaginative processes as the mediating psychological force between what is and what might be (in 2), interdisciplinary research into the relationship of art and psychology, with an understanding of the latter as an aesthetic normative science (in 4), and looks into the roles the experience of a loving relationship (5) and the process of valuing (3) play in human behaviour. While this diversity still wasn’t exhaustive of all the contributions to the Manifesto, considering that these talks represented only a (sizeable) fraction of the topics covered therein, at least it was representative of its multi-pronged approach and spirit of open-mindedness.

It is really not easy to boil what was said in these two hours down into a couple of paragraphs. I even guess every participant would tell a quite unique story on what it was all about. And, paradoxical as it may seem, this is probably part of the essence of what it was all about, since the participants themselves were a quite international crowd from different research traditions and cultural backgrounds. And one of the core tenets of cultural psychology is the premise, that psychological and behavioural facts are rooted and embodied in cultural practices. So, one of the core

challenges in cultural psychological research is to account not only for the general uniformity of human behaviour but also its culturally coloured and sometimes downright idiosyncratic particularities. My own personal story and reason to attend the conference was influenced by this reasoning: this symposium was, besides the obvious effort to make the Manifesto and the various proponents' research findings known to a wider audience, an attempt to re-enthuse the psychological community for research into individual human qualities and meanings, in short: human ways of being, by way of qualitative methods looking into their higher level psychological organisation. Of course, quantitative methods have their place and eligibility in cultural psychology, too. But the methods employed in the kind of research looking into the specifics and idiosyncrasies of an experiencing and valuing individual's orientation in his or her personal lifeworld must have an appropriate place in today's psychology's methodology, too, if we want to "make the study of specifically human ways of being the centre of psychological science", as cultural psychology as understood in the Yokohama Manifesto sets out to do. After all, psychology is generally understood to be the science of human thinking, experiencing and behaviour, and all of these processes only - or at least first and foremost - take place with and within individuals.

But my impression was that all the topics treated highlighted important practical and/or theoretical aspects of what it means to develop a new science of the human nature that is based on considerations of the - sometimes very personal - conditions of its cultural embeddedness, and trying to "restore the role of higher psychological functions as the central object of psychological science" (Valsiner, 2016, p. vi) in the process. There seemed to be a common understanding that a certain kind of intellectual integrity, cautiousness, and humility towards the topics, methods and "objects" (which are rather deemed subjects) of cultural psychological research is a necessary precondition for the attainment of this goal. Let me give an example. In the past, research findings from quantitative studies with relatively small groups of participants from a defined subset of people (which are all too often pretty homogeneous in light of the worldwide diversity of human beings), were often all too readily accepted as objective truths and thus generalized, either to a certain type of human beings, who are thought to be represented by the sample, or even to all humans on the

planet. This methodological mistake<sup>2</sup> is probably not completely gone for good. In cultural psychology as understood by the Yokohama Manifesto group, however, such an attitude seems to have no place, thankfully. The focus of cultural psychological research rather lies on the fundamental role of the specifically human ways of being - processes taking place in individual human beings: perception, feeling, imagining, valuing, reasoning, deciding - whereas the processes in question are conceived of as neither random nor predetermined things happening to a person, but much rather as a person's active and purposive doings.

The presentations also hinted at and made me think about the various directions where these undertakings can and most likely will lead to in the next future: the research into the role of imaginative processes in human behaviour, for example, could become solid proof and promise that these processes are not only reproducing the same old ways of being in the world, but can rather serve as the foundation of counterfactual, dialectical reasoning, and the judgement and evaluation of what is real in light of what is not, but might be<sup>3</sup>. It may also be of therapeutic value for individuals and even society as a whole, since intentional behaviour is on the one hand steeped in cultural traditions, but on the other hand can also sometimes be transformed and transcended into new dimensions by non-conforming, imaginative individuals, who challenge themselves and their social surroundings to not only judge what is (reality) in light of what might be (potentiality), but to actually turn some desirable aspect of the latter into the former.

More generally speaking, I am convinced that the considerations in the Manifesto are of interest to not just cultural psychologist, but theoretical psychologists, methodologists, personality psychologists, therapists, pedagogues and many more - since any psychologist's and person-related professional's view of the human nature and, consequentially, of how to best explore and understand human ways of being has a profound effect on what questions they ask, on how they deal with their clients and/or

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<sup>2</sup> That it indeed is a fundamental logical mistake has been demonstrated by Lamiell (1998, pp. 30-32).

<sup>3</sup> For an introduction to counterfactual, dialectical reasoning and judgement in the context of psychological personality characterization see Lamiell (2013).

research subjects, and, eventually, on how helpful, empathetic, and truthful they are.

After the vibrant presentations and thoughtful comments by the discussants, that highlighted some of the common threads binding the different aspects of cultural psychological research together into one scientific field, there was some time for a couple of questions from the audience, which was made good use of.

The symposium was complemented and rounded off with - partly social, partly professional - culinary get-togethers, where all presenters could intensify their collaboration and discussions and also had the chance of getting in touch with some of the publishers working with the Centre for Cultural Psychology at Aalborg University in Denmark.

To conclude: I think the symposium gave an impressive overview of the blossoming field of cultural psychology and was a nice opportunity for the participants to get to know their international collaborators. I am optimistic for the further development of the ideas in the Manifesto and the field of cultural psychology in general, which may very well have some bearing on the wider field of psychology.

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