

Waiting in the wings...

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Suzanne R. Kirschner & Jack Martin (Eds.), *The Sociocultural Turn in Psychology: The Contextual Emergence of Mind and Self*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010. 312 pp. ISBN 9780231148399 (pbk).

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We live now under the magical spell of neurotransmitters: Neuroscience informs us why we cheat (and why we don't), warns of serotonin's effects on our careers, and maps the vulnerabilities of the adolescent brain. Reports in scientific journals and the popular press credit neuroscience with discovering the causes of disorders, afflictions, and addictions and often promising someday-remedies for them. Astute observers note that with these neuro-knowledges of the self and chemical remedies for ailments our present era is begetting "neurochemical selves" or "pharmaceutical persons." Given the resounding claims that everything we do, everything we can do, is fully explicable in neuroscience terms, a book claiming the "sociocultural turn in psychology" might be assumed to be a history, perhaps a nostalgic chronicle of psychology in the pre-neuroscientific world. After all, scholars have already begun to historicize scientific projects that aim to understand human nature in social terms, assessing those projects as having transpired, perhaps already expired. In other words, they recount how the sociocultural science of human nature *was* once a scientific project. Thus, a recent history of psychiatric science is subtitled "When the Diagnosis Was Social, 1948–1980" (Staub, 2011). A compatible yet unwritten narrative of 20th-century human science might read: Once there circulated social theories of the mind—along with a concept of culture. Take note: *The Sociocultural Turn in Psychology* is no history. To the contrary, the volume corrals and highlights advances in theoretical perspectives that frame mind, self, emotion, identity, and other psychological entities "as emergent phenomena that are in no sense 'prior' to their socio-cultural surround" (p. 5). The clarity of these theory statements, some incorporating bold extensions of theory, demonstrates that there is benefit to scholarship that lives at the margins of mainstream or outside hegemonic intellectual movements. A number of the contributions to *Sociocultural Turn* undertake a kind of "open theorizing"; they at once offer readable, detailed, and well-referenced accounts of particular theories and also build upon the theories to explicate their nuances or ambiguities, identify their siblings as well as ancestors, and sometimes outline novel configurations among the theories. As such the chapters provide both substance and directive to non-reductive, non-deterministic models of the mind.

The sociocultural theories entertained in the volume are divided into four general approaches: discursive and constructivist, hermeneutic, dialogical, and neo-Vygotskian. Each approach is granted several chapters, some of which perform theoretical exploration (see Eva Magnusson and Jeanne Maracek's synthetic appraisal of feminist discourse analysis), whereas others offer case studies and empirical evidence (see Mark Freeman's exploration of cultural unconscious in memoirs). In their lucid introduction, editors Suzanne Kirschner and Jack Martin connect the otherwise varied theoretical approaches through three common themes: undoing of dualisms, consideration of agency, and the implications of taking psychology to be a "human science." These three themes pulse throughout the volume. Agency and non-dualist premises, for instance, are recurrent chords in John Shotter's turn to Wittgenstein to explicate "spontaneous reactions"; Frank Richardson and Blain Fowers's uptake on hermeneutics; and Kenneth Gergen's model of relational psychology. Jeff Sugarman and Jack Martin develop a non-reductive template for conceptualizing human agency, while Hubert Hermans and João Salgado propose a kindred conceptualization grounded in dialectical theory. These examples indicate that many of the contributors take agency as a serious matter of concern, although their appraisals vary. Some of the authors seek to recover classic conceptions, others to reconfigure what has been taken as agency, and a few to gesture dismissal of the notion of agency altogether. Notable among these considerations of agency is Sunil Bhatia's chapter on theorizing identity in transnational contexts. Bhatia's conception of agency (in terms of identity and self) is non-reductive, shown to be constitutively connected to "globalization, media, cable, and modern transportation, by communication technology, and by the virtual and actual back and forth movement between two or more societies" (p. 224). Taken together, these interrogations of agency reflect a larger problematic of selfhood in contemporary thought and, hence, they certainly will inform not only humanist and political theorists who seek a post-Foucauldian conception of agency, but also neuroscientists who seem to inevitably find themselves stuck on the shoals of intentionality, free will, and reflexivity. Those who turn to *The Sociocultural Turn in Psychology* for meditations on agency will be pleasantly repaid by finding "relatively little in the way of 'subpersonal' talk about brains doing things, emotions taking over, or attributions to particular cognitive abilities, personality factors, or neurophysiological mechanisms" (p. 11).

Tacit in the editors' identified themes is acknowledgement of the contributors' indebtedness to and respect for a handful of 20th-century human science theorists. Notable in this regard are several different deployments of Lev Vygotsky (especially in chapters by Rom Harré, Anna Stetsenko and Igor M. Arieviditch, and Michael Cole and Natalia Gajdamaschko). Other theorists inhabiting the pages include George Herbert Mead, William James, Hans-Georg Gadamer, John MacMurray, Piotr Galperin, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. To be especially appreciated are engagements with work by nearly forgotten but ever-prescient theorists like MacIntyre and MacMurray along with John Shotter's thoughtful return to Wittgenstein's theorizing on conduct and context. If readers cull information about Vygotsky from the relevant chapters, they can compile a fairly comprehensive review of his theorizing. The same culling cannot be performed with some of the other theorists, and consequently readers unfamiliar with such "classics" need to look elsewhere for such theory grounding. Fortunately there is sufficient bibliographic detail to guide those readers to original theory statements.

It might be premature to claim the arrival of a “sociocultural turn in psychology,” yet as this volume illustrates, many psychologists (neuroscientists included) will benefit richly from “turning to” the recent and classic sociocultural theories of mind and personhood.

Reference

Staub, M. E. (2011). *Madness in civilization: When the diagnosis was social, 1948–1980*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.