

# The topic of subjectivity in psychology: Contradictions, paths and new alternatives

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## Abstract

This paper draws a picture of how topics related to subjectivity have appeared in different psychological theories, such as psychoanalysis, Gestalt and post-structuralist approaches, discussing in depth a specific proposition from a cultural-historical standpoint. I argue that, in most of these theories, subjectivity has been used to refer to specific processes and phenomena without advancing a more general theory about it. The way in which subjectivity was treated within the Cartesian/Enlightenment tradition, taken together with the individualistic tradition of psychology, led critical psychological theories to reject the concept. In this way, such critical theories have omitted the heuristic value of subjectivity to study processes that can neither be exhausted by language, nor by discourse. A new proposal of subjectivity is highlighted, based on the cultural-historical tradition in psychology. From this perspective, subjectivity is defined by units of emotions and symbolical processes generated throughout human experience. On the basis of such definition, I discuss how institutionalized orders can be subverted by subjective productions that represent new social pathways. Far from being a remnant of Modernity, in this way subjectivity is defined as a human production, capable of transcending the apparent objective limits of human existence.

## KEYWORDS

discourse, subjective configuration, subjective senses, subjectivity

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, psychology has avoided the ontological definition<sup>1</sup> of its concepts, replacing the specific nature of psychological phenomena by concepts that deal with other domains previously established by science (Abuljanova, 1973). Clear examples of this are concepts like system, behavior, reflex, energy, variables, language and, more recently, the concept of discourse. All of these were generated in other sciences and in philosophy before being used within psychology. However, none of them highlight the specific subjective quality of human phenomena, as engendered within socio-culturally and historically located realities.

The failure of psychology in advancing new ontological definitions, on which new theoretical systems related to the systemic functioning of mind could be developed, has led to an extensive, empirical and descriptive taxonomy of categories that are mainly interrelated via statistical criteria, without any theoretical construction. Subjectivity, as treated in this paper, does not represent just another concept of psychology, but a new ontological definition of human phenomena. Subjectivity emerges as a new qualitative human phenomenon defined as the unit between symbolical processes and emotions. As discussed below, none of the psychological theories that refer directly or indirectly to subjectivity formulate a theory based on such a complex system.

Theory, as such, has been mistreated in psychology due to its subordination to empirical facts or to its use as a dogma. In both cases, theory is reduced to labels or definitions used a priori, which are imposed on the information coming from the studied phenomenon, instead of being used as general system of intelligibility, from which new meanings can be produced during professional and research practices.

The fragmentation of psychology in the XX century is rightly exemplified by Danziger:

*The story of twentieth-century academic Psychology is the story of an ultimately unsuccessful struggle against an ever more obvious fragmentation (...). Psychologists had gained an academic foothold by doing experiments on such topics as sensation, perception and memory. For some time, that remained the respectable core of the discipline, but how test intelligence related to this core was far from clear. It was much easier to annex such a field institutionally than to assimilate it intellectually. (Danziger, 1997, p. 85)*

Empirical definitions are theoretically empty, leading to an understanding of practical and research activities as mere technical empirical and instrumental procedures. As a result, practices addressed by the quantitative measurement of psychological features have thus been extended in psychology.

Nevertheless, European psychology, unlike American behavioral psychology, took another path, one more influenced by philosophy and social sciences, within which theory was given more attention. Paradoxically, Soviet psychology in the 1920s was closer to behaviorism than to other European theories, such as Gestalt's theory, despite the profound influence of Gestalt's theory on Vygotsky's work in the early 1930s.

The present paper aims to bring back subjectivity as a culturally, socially and historically located human production, characterized by units of symbolical processes and emotions, which appear together as subjective singular configurations, both of which configure social and individual subjectivities in their complex interweaving. In contraposition to the individualistic psychology that had prevailed during the first half of the XX century, in the 1960s there was a

turn towards a social psychology focused on socially engendered psychological phenomena (Moscovici, 1967; Tajfel, 1965).

Since the 1980s, the most innovative and critical trends within psychology have been based on terms like discourse, deconstruction, relations of power, gender and so on, omitting the different paths of subjectivation, through which those processes are subjectively produced by individuals and social groups. This gap does not imply rejecting those important concepts, but implies complementing them by facing the complex challenges that come with the study of human phenomena. Subjectivity as discussed in this paper is an alternative to fill this gap.

The paper begins with a short overview of psychoanalysis and Gestalt theory, due to their relevance to the discussion in focus. Psychoanalysis, for instance, has been taken as the reference for the topic of subjectivity in culture, philosophy and social sciences in general, as a result of the theoretical vacuum associated with this topic in psychology and social sciences.

## **2 | PSYCHOANALYSIS: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVANCING THE TOPIC OF SUBJECTIVITY**

This section does not aim to be a historical overview of psychoanalysis as such. It is, rather, a dialogue with a series of authors who made important advancements in topics that are relevant to the conception of subjectivity. The authors discussed below are revisionists of Freud, Klein, Winnicott and Lacan, developing the cultural character of subjectivity from the works of these authors. In their attempt to overcome some of the universal principles upon which these authors built their works, many points of contact appear with the theoretical position sustained in the present paper in regards to a cultural- historical definition of subjectivity.

Despite the fact that subjectivity was never explicitly assumed by Freud as his theoretical focus, post-Freudian authors attempted to identify subjectivity in Freud's definition of representation, understanding it as an imaginary production capable of embodying the force of drives (Castoriadis, 1995; Elliott, 1992).

The use of Freud's definition of representation, despite the efforts of the aforementioned authors, remained very vague in its psychological nature. According to Freud, drives have a somatic nature, leading to the emergence of the psychical apparatus only through representation which, according to Freud's understanding, cannot be identified as conscious. Representations were defined by Freud as living instances with functions that are beyond the individual consciousness. Elliott defines representation in Freud as "an indeterminable imaging of drives (...) there is no such thing as a drive in its pure state. Libidinal drives are mediated through the forming of images, by the 'representational process'" (Elliott, 1992, pp. 25–26).

That relation between drive and representation is a corner stone of psychoanalysis, on which the libidinal drives are defined as foundational for the psychological; the motivational side of psychological functioning remains dependent on the original natural and universal drives. This fact makes it impossible for psychoanalysis to recognize the intrinsic dynamic character of new psychological phenomena that are organized on the basis of historically located ongoing socio-cultural engendered experiences.

The main obstacle for the revitalization of the topic of subjectivity in psychoanalysis is that its theoretical basis sets up in advance the situation it intends to explain, which is common to all

versions of psychoanalysis. How could intelligibility be produced in research on the Oedipus complex, or on early sexual drives? How could research be advanced about the universal statement that children try to escape from the painfulness of “lack” through their imaginary fantasies? These universal claims are impossible to study; they are hermetical points of departure that have to be assumed in order to work within one or another version of psychoanalysis. These foundational and universal concepts are present even in the more advanced versions of psychoanalysis, those that emphasize the cultural genesis of subjectivity (Castoriadis, 1995; Frosh, 2002, 2010; Parker, 2011, and Elliott, 1992, among others).

In Elliott’s terms, those hermetic points of departure, previously referred to, appear as follows:

*In Freud’s eyes, the fundamental condition for a drive to attain psychical expression is by means of a “delegation through representation”. This involves primary repression, the fixation and sedimentation of drives to representational forms. The primary unconscious thus exists as a condition of subjectivity, from which “repression proper” and consciousness emerge... The primal representation of the unconscious is the affective anchor for the fulfillment of desire and, as a matter of definition, specifically resist being brought to consciousness. (Elliott, 1992, pp. 28-29)*

It is difficult to know what the author’s phrase, “delegation through representation”, means. In any case, the absolute and universal character of the statement above must be either accepted or rejected, with no chance of confronting it during the research process. It is also difficult to accept that the “primary unconscious... exists as a condition of subjectivity”. In my opinion, there is no primary unconscious; unconscious appears as a quality of subjectivity. Subjectivity as a cultural-historical formation is not anchored in a universal condition of individuals. These claims only assume meaning within the theoretical apparatus of psychoanalysis, which acts as an external constraint on research and practice.

Anyway, as we will discuss below, the above mentioned authors, among others who share some of these foundational principles, had also developed important critiques, advancing important new constructions that should be taken into account in discussing subjectivity on this new basis, as this paper aims to do.

### **3 | THE PREMISES FOR A CULTURAL-HISTORICAL DEFINITION OF SUBJECTIVITY**

K. Lewin and his group, Vygotsky, and other Soviet psychologists, like Rubinstein and Bozhovich, also advanced important concepts oriented towards understanding psychological processes and personality as cultural, social and historical phenomena, although they kept narrow definitions of social realities and culture (González Rey, 2016). Nonetheless, they advanced toward new definitions of emotions and motivation, taking an important step forward on the subjective character of psychological phenomena. For the first time in the history of psychology, K. Lewin and his followers broke down the primacy of social determinism in relation to psychological phenomena, emphasizing how human needs make the difference in the relevance of social environments for individuals.

Lewin strongly influenced Vygotsky’s shift to emotions, motivation and consciousness between 1932 and 1934 (Yasnitsky, 2012, 2016; Zavershneva, 2010, Zavershneva, 2016). He also

highly influenced the work of Bozhovich and her team, the group within Soviet psychology which made the most notorious advances in the study of personality and motivation, in which the topic of subjectivity was embedded in the study of personality (Tolstyx, 2008).

One of the closest collaborators of Lewin, Tamara Dembo, made an interesting contribution related to a new comprehension of psychological concepts, giving attention to their qualitative character. She wrote: "I had to get away from properties, which were static notions (not affecting other units) that did not permit understanding of the nature of psychological qualities in their totality or in their manifestation as single entities and occurrences" (Dembo, 1993, p.15).<sup>2</sup>

Dembo's turn towards the qualitative nature of psychological units led her to also advance on the qualitative nature of psychological research, articulating for the first time in history the idea that theory and methodology in psychology are two intermingled processes that must advance together in psychological research. The malleability and dynamic of such units fulfill an important theoretical demand for advances in the topic of subjectivity. These units were defined as psychological qualities in movement, simultaneously characterizing the quality of the system and its expressions as single entities, as stated by Dembo above. This definition is an important theoretical premise for understanding subjectivity as a cultural-historical production, as intended in this paper.

Advancing her definition of this new concept, she stated:

*I could no longer bear to deal with analysis of properties that were related to our senses yet unrelated from psychological unit to another. Finally, I called for a change! [...] But change also seemed to entail another more positive meaning; change indicated activity and thus was in contrast to properties understood in a static way. (Dembo, 1993, pp. 17-18)*

The emphasis on change and movement as intrinsic to the qualitative units of psychological life permits progress toward a comprehension of the psychological system, not as an intrapsychical system, but as a system in action, as an open and dynamic system. This proposal by Dembo was close to Rubinstein's principle of the unity of consciousness and activity, as well as to the last concepts proposed by Vygotsky for the comprehension of psychological functioning, like sense and *perezhivanie*.

This emphasis on the qualitative character of psychological concepts was absent in cultural-historical psychology in terms of how it was developed during its Soviet period. Psychoanalysis, for a long time, was only related to clinical practice, and it passed unnoticed among psychoanalysts themselves that practice represents new epistemological premises for advancing new methodological pathways. Maybe this has been one of the reasons why psychoanalytic theory has kept many of its principles beyond the questioning of research.

Dembo proposed, following Lewin, a promissory theoretical-methodological articulation oriented toward understanding psychological functioning as inseparable from the course of individual social life. However, in advancing this articulation between social environment and psychological concepts, Lewin took the field as the ground within which psychological concepts and the environment are linked to each other, without advancing a definition of any psychological system.

Subjectivity, as proposed in this paper, implies a transcendence of its comprehension as individual and intra-psychical essence and, at the same time, requires an advance beyond the social determinism that characterized Soviet psychology. Subjectivity displays a generative character, permitting individuals and groups to transcend, through their subjective productions, the

immediate influences from their environments; subjective processes are based on the creation of new human, cultural environments. Having their genesis within culture, subjective processes are, at the same time, the basis for the cultural development. As Cassirer stated:

*Consequently all schemata which science evolves in order to classify, organize, and summarize the phenomena of the real world turn out to be nothing but arbitrary schemes – airy fabrics of the mind, which express not the nature of things, but the nature of mind. (Cassirer, 1953, p. 7)*

There are arbitrary symbolical schemes generated by culture to advance the topic of subjectivity, schemes which Cassirer referred to as the link still missing in the work of Lewin's group as well as in that of Vygotsky and the Soviet psychologists. These "arbitrary schemes – airy fabric of the mind" characterize the nature of mind and of culture, which are intermingled with each other in such a way that one is generated by the other.

Subjectivity, according to this definition, is a subversive concept, because its definition implies continuous resistance to and confrontation with the social hegemonic *status quo* throughout the history of mankind, opening a theoretical pathway to explain this resistance. At the same time, subjective phenomena are intrinsically polychromatic inside one culture, making impossible any attempt to standardize subjectivity or to submit it to control. Change and development are intrinsic to subjectivity, so any form of resistance is engendered from inside one structure of power, within new subjective productions that may lead to non-predictable changes and consequences, transcending the dominant established rationality. As well as culture, subjectivity is not anchored in ahistorical truths.

The model of functioning, which makes subjectivity different from any other ontological definition assumed by psychology in its history, first appeared in philosophy. Marx, Dewey, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Edgar Morin, among others, contributed to the representation of such a complex phenomenon.

If modernism adhered to a rationality in which reasoning marginalizes emotions, post-structuralism, as one of the paths taken by the postmodern movement in social sciences, adopted rationality, reducing human phenomena to discursive practices. The hermeneutical shift inaugurated by Heidegger was continued by Gadamer, Foucault, Derrida and Rorty who, despite their differences, agreed on replacing epistemology by hermeneutic. In doing so, they attempted to make knowledge a permanent flux that can never be taken as a theoretical system related to well-located questions in the way knowledge can be understood by natural sciences.

The understanding of discourse as practice led to the ignoring of the relevance of theoretical models as paths of intelligibility about realities that do not function as texts or as discursive processes. In their critiques of epistemology, the above-mentioned authors referred specifically to representational epistemology. Despite Heidegger's later reconsideration of his initial critique of epistemology, Foucault, Derrida and Rorty, in fact, rejected not only epistemology, but all theoretical systems based on scientific knowledge. Nonetheless, subjectivity specified an ontological definition which was impossible to reduce to texts, discourses or language.

The rejection of foundational epistemology led to a rejection of the kind of ontological presuppositions on which that epistemology lies, among which was subjectivity as it was understood by the philosophies grouped under the Cartesian / Enlightenment tradition. Neglecting subjectivity, in the way it was treated in that tradition, led to the disregarding of the heuristic value of subjectivity as a phenomenon to define qualities of human beings and human realities that could not be defined through concepts in fashion in post-structuralist thinking.

The opposition between text and nature was a dangerous precedent in the rejection of subjectivity as a topic in human sciences, not because subjectivity belongs to the domain of nature, but because the challenges that its study presents are very similar to those advanced today in the study of the natural sciences (Prigogine, 2004). This coincidence suggests orienting our attention again toward a new epistemology on which new methodological proposals can be based.

As Westphal stressed in relation to Rorty's radical rejection of epistemology: "By failing to distinguish the generic epistemological task from the specifically modern foundationalist projects, Rorty obscures the fact that hermeneutics is not the replacement of epistemology as such, but the replacement of one type of epistemology with another" (Westphal, 1999, p.416).

The idea of discourse as practice (Foucault, 1987), as a network of symbolical processes, within which human practices take place, turns discourse into a universal ontological principle capable of explaining all human phenomena, instead of recognizing it as an important quality of all human phenomena, but which does not exhaust them.

Discursive practices were taken as emancipatory from a naturalistic and individualistic psychology, but by doing this some theories, such as social constructionism, for example, rejected the relation between theory, epistemology and methodology in favor of the construction of truth as conversational agreement. This extreme position is clearly stressed by Shotter:

*A central methodological assumption of social constructionism is that – instead of the inner dynamics of the individual psyche (romanticism), or the already determined characteristics of the external world (modernism) – we must study the continuous everyday flow of contingent communicative activity occurring between people. (Shotter, 1995, p. 160)*

Once again, those authors inspired by post-structuralist discourse criticized the inner dynamics of the individual psyche due to the way it was constructed by romanticism. The proposal of subjectivity discussed in this paper is also far from the romantic understanding of the inner psychological world, and also differs from the concept of psyche. However, unlike the constructionist position, this paper advances another proposal to understand individual subjectivity in such a way that the social is not represented as external and different, but as part of a complex recursive system that integrates social and individual subjectivities in different levels. Discourses do not represent the opposite of human subjectivity; on the contrary, discourse is subjectively configured in the complex interweaving between social and individual subjectivities.

The emphasis on social phenomena as symbolical constructed realities represented an important step forward in the comprehension of human actions as inseparable from social constructions. Nevertheless, the theories that take discourses, narratives, and social representations as their theoretical epicenters, instead of advancing a new conception of the individual inextricably intermingled with those social phenomena, replaced individuals by socially constructed realities (González Rey, 2015).

#### **4 | SOME CONSTRAINTS AND THE ADVANCES WITHIN TRADITIONAL CULTURAL-HISTORICAL PSYCHOLOGY REGARDING THE STUDY OF SUBJECTIVITY**

Cultural-historical psychology is a label widely used to define Vygotsky's instrumental period between 1926 and 1931 (Leontiev, 1984; Yasnitsky, 2009, 2015; González Rey, 2011, 2014,

2016). However, the reduction of this label to one period of Vygotsky's work seems to me a very narrow and reductionist use of the term. Instead, all of the main trends in Soviet psychology that recognized the cultural, social and historical genesis of the human psyche can be considered as cultural-historical theories (González Rey, 2014b).

From the 1920s, Soviet psychology's dominant versions subscribed to a dogmatic social determinism, in which the genesis of the psychological processes was reduced in extent to the internalization of external operations (González Rey, 2014b). However, that social determinism was subverted by different authors, among which I will focus on some of Vygotsky's theoretical concepts in the last period of his work, due to their relevance to advancing the discussion on subjectivity from a cultural-historical standpoint. The concepts of sense and *perezhivanie*, as developed by Vygotsky in 1933–34, opened an interesting path toward a new comprehension of human consciousness as a psychological system involved in human actions (González Rey, 2009, 2011, 2014).

The growing attention to *perezhivanie* (Fakhrutdinova, 2010; Fleer & Quinones, 2013; Mitchel, 2016; Veresov, 2017) in the last ten years has, to some extent, separated *perezhivanie* from sense. I have always attempted to interrelate these concepts to each other due to their complementary meanings and consequences, in order to advance on the topic of subjectivity (González Rey, 2009, 2011). In regards to sense, Vygotsky wrote: "A word's sense is the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as a result of the word [...] Meaning is only one of these zones of the sense that the word acquires in the context of speech" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 276). Advancement on subjectivity requires the defining of such theoretical concepts that permit the integration of culture and subjectivity within the nature of their own action, without reducing one to the other. The concept of sense was an important premise in this direction.

The concept of *perezhivanie* somehow overlaps the concept of sense, but *perezhivanie* was specifically addressed toward specifying that social influences in themselves have no significance for human development. The concept of *perezhivanie* stressed the inseparable integration of the social environment and the child's personality. These concepts allowed Vygotsky to emancipate psychological development from the direct influences of the environment.<sup>3</sup>

Vygotsky explicitly stressed his effort to understand human beings as a system capable of integrating multiple processes and functions in his discussions about thinking. So, in "Thinking and Speech" Vygotsky stated: "Thinking was divorced from the full vitality of life, from the motives, interests and inclinations of the thinking individual" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 50).

This calls my attention to the fact that, in the same book in which sense was defined, Vygotsky defined thinking as intrinsically associated not only with speech, but with the "full vitality of life", referring to this vitality as a concept that included motives, interests and inclinations. Nonetheless, the concept of sense was not used by Vygotsky to transcend these more fragmented and traditional concepts which, in my opinion, resulted from his definition of sense within the domain of speech as "word sense". At that time, Vygotsky had still not assembled the advances in the concepts of sense and *perezhivanie* into a new representation of the psychological system.

Communication, as a specific and independent concept of psychology capable of integrating social and individual psychological processes, was only discussed by Soviet psychology at the end of 1970s (Lomov, 1978). That was an important period in continuing to develop the premises for the study of subjectivity in Soviet psychology. Communication as a concept was completely replaced by the concept of based object activity under the theoretical hegemony of Activity Theory in Soviet psychology. The constraints created by Activity Theory to advance on the topic



of subjectivity in Soviet psychology have been carefully discussed by me elsewhere (González Rey, 2002, 2009, 2011, 2014a, 2014b).

The last concepts developed by Vygotsky, taken together with the consideration of communication as a relevant and specific concept, were important premises in overcoming the constraints of Activity Theory, advancing the topic of subjectivity. However, the lack of an ontological definition of these concepts made it impossible for Soviet psychologists to advance a definition of subjectivity addressed toward understanding a new, properly human phenomenon as resulting from human cultural, social and historical existence.

## 5 | SOME IMPORTANT APPROACHES TO THE MATTER OF SUBJECTIVITY TODAY

Vygotskian studies is an area that appeared in Western psychology inspired by Vygotsky's legacy, the roots of which lie in pioneering American interpretations of Vygotsky's work (Bruner, Cole, Wertsch, among others). These interpretations were greatly influenced by Leontiev's group which, via Luria, monopolized contacts with American psychologists in the 1960s (González Rey, 2014a).

During Soviet times, Soviet psychology had its identity defined in contraposition with so called "bourgeois theories", which explained the lack of dialogue between Soviet authors and representatives of other theories and fields of psychology, marking Soviet psychology as the privileged expression of Marxism in psychology. Up to the present day, dialogue between Vygotskian studies circles and other theories has developed little. There have been important attempts to develop a cultural, social and historical psychology within other theoretical traditions, and to advance on the cultural genesis of the human mind (Castoriadis, Holzkamp, Frosh, Elliot, Parker, among others), which are rarely quoted by the representatives of Vygotskian studies.

Holzkamp's explicit assumption of subjectivity as a result of societal conditions is an important antecedent in advancing a cultural-historical definition of subjectivity. Assuming Marx as an important reference for his work, Holzkamp made explicit how the individual, as an active agent, has remained outside of Marx's dominant representation:

*As many futile attempts have shown, progress in this direction (the author refers to the comprehension of human nature as results of the societal conditions of life) by starting with the Marxist anatomy of bourgeois society and expecting somehow to arrive at a conception of the individual from the dissection and specification of the mode of production in particular capitalist societies. No matter how precise and detailed such an analysis may be, the "individual as such" remains somehow out of reach (Holzkamp, 1991, p.51).*

Holzkamp opposed a definition of subjectivity as encapsulating intra-psychical structure, defending a specific definition of the individual as inseparable from societal conditions. He argued: "(...) human subjectivity, as the possibility of conscious control over one's own life conditions, always and necessarily requires moving beyond individuality toward participation in the collective determination of the societal process" (ibid, p.58). Holzkamp, recognizing subjectivity as phenomenon, did not make an important contribution to a new theoretical definition of subjectivity. He remained within the limits of Soviet psychology in his emphasis on the conscious character of psychological functioning and its function of control.

Holzkamp continued using traditional concepts, such as cognitive processes, motivation and others, defining subjectivity as one more concept associated with two main attributes. These attributes were *personal action potency* as a “means of revealing the way in which individuals related to their possibilities” and the concept of “productive needs”, used by him to define the “emotional aspect of psyche” (ibid, p.58). Emotions continued to be referred to as psyche and have not been understood as intrinsic to the definition of subjectivity due to their subordination to rational processes. In his own words “(...) it became clear that with the *objective necessity* of having to participate in the social provisioning process in order to control individual life conditions, a subjective necessity also developed” (ibid, p. 59, author’s emphasis).

Psychoanalysis, from its more critical positions, unlike Holzkamp, emphasized the generative capacity of the imagination beyond the conscious control of individuals. Authors such as Castoriadis, Frosh and Elliot stressed the relevance of imagination as a distinctive non-rational attribute of the human psyche, something that, in my opinion, is essential for advancing a theoretical definition of subjectivity. As Castoriadis pointed out: “Man’s distinguishing trait is not logic, but imagination, and, more precisely, unbridled imagination, defunctionalized imagination. As radical imagination of the singular psyche and as social instituting imaginary, this sort of imagination provides the conditions for reflective thought to exist” (Castoriadis, 1995, p. 15).

That association between imagination and reflective thought is very important in understanding thinking as a subjective function, because imagination represents the creative character of thinking. At the same time, as Vygotsky defended in “The Psychology of Art”, “[...] we see therefore, that emotion and imagination are not two separated processes; on the contrary, they are the same process” (Vygotsky, 1971, p.210). Psychological functioning acquires its subjective character based on imagination, through which emotions are embedded in psychological functions, turning functions into subjective configured processes. As Castoriadis stated, “imagination (...) is always paired with the positing of new forms/figures of the thinkable, which are created by the radical imagination and are subject to the control of reflection” (ibid, p.34).

Imagination is much more than this; it is a subjective production that transforms and integrates images into concepts, and generates new concepts that lead to new models of the thinkable, turning emotions into symbolic processes, while symbolic processes become inseparable from emotions. From these processes emerge representations that, once formed, become sources of new concepts, images and other productions, leading to new imaginative creations. Imagination is intrinsic to the creation of new cultural realities in a path in which new forms of subjectivation are continuously emerging.

Individuals continuously produce conscious representations; they are producers of reflections that, at times, lead them to create a “(...) way to break the closure in which we are each time necessarily caught up as subject”, as Castoriadis himself noted (ibid, p.35). When this happens, individuals or groups may become subjects of their action, opening new paths within the social order, whether in action or imaginarily advancing new subjective resources. The subject also emerges actively organizing its resistance to a situation that cannot be changed with a personal or group action.

From my point of view, the understanding in Lacanian psychoanalysis of the symbolic, as depending on the social order in contraposition to the imaginary, preserves the dichotomy between conscious and unconscious that Freud unfruitfully attempted to overcome with his structural model of the psychological apparatus. Elliott echoes this dichotomy as follows: “The symbolic, on the contrary (of the imaginary), depends upon the continual structuring of the imaginary, grasping as the transformation of the virtual order of ‘phantasized objects’ into a matrix

of common, social forms” (Elliott, 1992, p.246). This dichotomy between the symbolic and the imaginary is grounded in the primary split between the drive and the psychological.

Finally in this picture of theories, it is possible to identify some positions that are closer to what subjectivity means in our proposal. So, for example, Parker made an interesting attempt to overcome the sexual reductionism of Freud. He sees sex as a human condition that is embedded in actions that apparently have nothing to do with sex:

*(...) we track in analysis how sex comes to attach itself into our representation of other things. Not so that sex appears as the bare ground on which the rest of our life is played out, but how sex comes to influence, by turns to enliven or ruin, the ground, the ground of being (Parker, 2011, p. 16).*

The way in which sex appears in Parker’s definition has important points of contact with our understanding of sex as a subjective configuration. As well as sex becoming attached to our representations of other things, as Parker has said, other social symbolical constructions, such as morality, gender and religion, become attached to the subjective configuration of sex as subjective senses. This is related to the way in which those social constructions have been experienced by individuals in other areas of life that apparently have nothing to do with sex, but that emerge through specific subjective senses in a sexual setting. This perspective understands sex, as well as all human experience, as inseparable from the network of lived experiences, in a process such that the cultural-historical comprehension of subjectivity reaches its maximum meaning. Social symbolical constructions, such as discourses, social representations, the normative institutional system of values, and other dominant symbolical social productions, are not external to individuals and groups; they appear subjectively and are singularly configured in them.

Following his position of attempting to relativize the universal claims of psychoanalysis related to an “internal psychological nature”, Parker stated:

*There is then a series of consequences for diagnosis, for how psychoanalysis might tackle ‘obsessionalising’, ‘psychoticising’, ‘hystericising’, and ‘perversionalising’ strategies in the clinic. Our task is to trace how these categories are historically constituted and to engage with them as lived positions in relation to structures of power in capitalist society (Parker, *ibid*, p. 40).*

The idea of “mental pathology” is also alien to our proposal on subjectivity. Parker’s call to understand these phenomena as “lived positions in relation to structures of power in capitalist society” goes in the direction of our comprehension of human phenomena, including suffering, as subjectively configured processes, in which individual biographies appear through the subjective senses, through one experience of life qualifying others, defining the subjective configurations within which the actual experience is lived. However, the structures of power in capitalism are associated with many different experiences, within which other processes are involved. In relation to these different experiences, the effects of those structures of power should be known by their expression in the subjective configuration that reveals the unique trajectories of lived experiences. The structures of power in capitalism are not an external determinant of human suffering; they act within unique networks of the individual social life from which the individual and social subjective configurations emerge. Within these subjective configurations it is impossible to separate the structures of power in capitalism from the many occurrences of one individual or group life. Individuals and groups are not passive recipients of social influences.

It is not possible to reduce the emergence of subjective disturbance to political reasons only, or to the functioning of normative repressive institutions. It is under these adverse conditions that individuals also emerge as subjects capable of resisting and of opening up new alternatives when facing the dominant institutional forces. Despite being configured within the interweaving of societal forces, within a historically located cultural order, subjectivity is always beyond the processes engaged in its genesis.

As Elliott pointed out:

*Such an analysis leaves no room for the autonomous action of acting subjects, which form the starting point for the progressive unfolding of social contradictions (...) this gives the impression that the connection between social power and the structure of modern work practices affect everyone in an equal manner. It thus completely ignores the intricate ways in which repressive work practices and industrial relations are produced, sustained and experienced by individuals in various social settings (Elliott, 1992, p.77).*

The omission of the subject in current psychological and philosophical theories under the influence of “post-structuralist wings” has made it very difficult to understand a definition of a subject who, being subjectively configured within some circumstances emerges as an instance of active resistance to the dominant order within which that emergence takes place. The generative and active character of both subjectivity and subject assume an important heuristic value in explaining that rupture.

One of the problems of psychoanalysis that limits its advances in the understanding of subjectivity as a cultural-historically engendered phenomenon, is that all its classical tendencies represent a closed system, grounded on different hermetic beliefs which are impossible to reconcile with each other into one path capable of being confronted and developed in research and in professional practices. Facing this fact, Bollas defends the need for pluralism.

Bollas sharply states:

*Indeed, a risk faced by remaining in one of these schools (the author is referring to the classic school of psychoanalysis) is the scotomatic effect of a canalized vision. Rather than listening to the analysand with an open mind, they listen out for something in particular, whether it is the castration complex, the drive derivative or the ego position. Such selective listening makes psychic transformation in analysis possible so far as the analytical model is concerned (Bollas, 2007, p.6).*

The pluralism claimed by Bollas stressed the limits inherent in psychoanalysis in its dominant practices. The theory of subjectivity has to imply openness to concepts of professional practice and research, and a capacity to change and develop in response to the confrontations that this implies.

## **6 | ADVANCING THE TOPIC OF SUBJECTIVITY ON A CULTURAL-HISTORICAL BASIS**

Despite the advances related to subjectivity by the aforementioned authors, subjectivity as such has not been the main focus for any of them. Due to this fact, none of these authors was

explicitly oriented to subjectivity. Therefore, they made contributions that represent important premises on which to advance this topic from a cultural-historical standpoint. From our perspective, subjectivity implies a new system that characterizes human realities and processes. The advancement of a theory of subjectivity from a cultural-historical standpoint might address the next demands:

1. To advance a new ontological definition of what subjectivity is, making explicit the differences with other concepts that have characterized psychology, which have kept it restricted to individual phenomena. Subjectivity integrates processes and configurations, which are engendered within cultural-social life, but which, at the same time, do not reproduce cultural social life. Being generated within culture, subjectivity does not depart from any universal structured principle. Subjectivity is emancipated from psyche as a natural system and, at the same time, is a resource for emancipation from the socially dominant institutionalized order;
2. The need to integrate a qualitative side of human phenomena, both social and individual, understanding each of these configured within the other through specific subjective senses resulting from the subjective configuration of the other. Despite one being configured within the other, social and individual subjectivities represent two different sites of subjective productions, maintaining tensional and contradictory relations between them;
3. An attempt to define integrative and dynamic concepts capable of advancing an understanding of how the systems of socio-cultural historical experiences and realities are configured into new kinds of subjective phenomena, whose generative character is the basis for the co-developed system of culture-subjectivity.

Our representation of subjectivity departs from the need to integrate symbolical processes and emotions as dynamic units, which characterize the ontological definition of subjectivity as a qualitative level of human phenomena, both social and individual. Subjectivity is not defined in opposition to objectivity; it refers to the objective character of human phenomena. Subjectivity is a specific quality of human phenomena within culture, and its functioning involves individual and social instances as agents who have active, generative and creative character.

Our comprehension of subjectivity departs from concepts that embody the use psychological units, as defended by Dembo and Vygotsky. Vygotsky used the idea of psychological unit to define different psychological phenomena. At the very end of his work, he defined *perezhivanie* as the unit of consciousness (Vygotsky, 1984). However, the meaning of sense and *perezhivanie* began to overlap, for both concepts were similar in some of their attributes. They were both aimed at integrating consciousness and action through the interplay of dynamically interconnected elements, including those of a cognitive and affective nature.

Unlike Vygotsky's definition of "word sense", our theoretical proposal advances the concept of subjective sense as the most elemental unit that embodies the quality of subjectivity as a system. This unit integrates symbolic processes and emotions in such a way that the unit becomes a new ontological definition. This definition of subjectivity allows the transcendence of dichotomies, such as intellectual-emotional, external-internal and subjective-objective, which have historically characterized psychology. In Soviet psychology, symbolical processes were used in a very narrow way, as signs that mediate psychological functions (Zinchenko, 1993).

Any social experience becomes subjective through the emergence of subjective senses, which represent a subjective side of any living experience. Subjective senses always carry an imaginary character. They do not reflect objective processes of experience; they are individual and social

productions based on how social symbolic constructions are experienced by individuals, groups and institutions, depending on their own subjective configured histories. Subjective senses emerge, embedded in the complex context within which the actual experience is taking place. Attributes like race, gender, age, social status, pathological labels and, in general, all the social symbolical constructions on which our cultural-social environment is constructed, are embedded in human experiences as subjective senses. These subjective senses are not ruled by the dominant manner in which this social symbolical environment appears in socially dominant discourses, social representations or other social symbolic productions. Only by studying the subjective level of experience, whether social or individual, will we be capable of knowing how individuals, groups and institutions are affected in their different experiences by social symbolical constructions.

Subjective senses have an ephemeral character. They emerge as snapshots of symbolic-emotional flashes that unfold in a chaotic movement, from which subjective configurations emerge as a self-regulative and generative organization of subjective senses. Subjective configurations are dynamic, but have a relative stability due to the congruency of the subjective senses that they generate. These are different but complementary in their effects on the subjective settings of individuals and groups in their ongoing actions.

The relative stability of the subjective configurations results from the resistance they offer to change in the face of the new processes that result from the actual moment of any ongoing activity. At the same time, this stability is relative, because paths and decisions taken by individuals and groups, as the agents of their own actions, lead to new subjective senses. Any new paths taken by the agents of actions will imply the emergence of new subjective senses, which would integrate, or not, into the subjective configuration in the process of one experience.

Subjective senses always imply different and simultaneous processes; one emotion evokes a perception that turns into a thought, which evokes new emotions that lead to the imagining of new paths in such an endless movement of subjective senses and configurations that characterizes the subjective functioning of individual and social instances. This dynamic, malleable, instantaneous and transitory character of the subjective senses allows the representation of the “microcosmos of one life” as a unique subjective configuration in the different experiences lived by individuals, groups and other social networks, not as something given forever, but as a different living configuration in which that microcosm takes different forms, highlighting new angles of a lived history. Subjectivity is not a result; it represents an authentic human production that differentiates itself from all the processes engaged in its genesis.

Emotions are intrinsic and decisive in the way that symbolical social constructions appear as singular living processes. As Dewey brilliantly noted:

*It has been noted that human experience is made human through the existence of associations and recollections, which are strained through the mesh of imagination so as to suit the demands of the emotion.... The things most emphasized in imagination as it reshapes experience are things which are absent in reality. (Dewey, 1920, pp. 103-105)*

It is impressive how Dewey intuitively integrated within the language of his epoch the unity of the symbolic and imaginary as parts of the same reality, underlying the role of imagination and emotions in the production of our reality. Despite not having explicitly spoken on subjectivity, Dewey's (2016) definition of experience is reflected in some key topics developed below in our proposal on subjectivity from a cultural-historical standpoint. It is impressive how the legacy

of Dewey and that of M. Ponty have been crystalized in some of the dominant concepts within the main philosophical principles of their main philosophical affiliation, Pragmatism and Phenomenology, while omitting their important legacy in advancing a cultural-historical representation of human subjectivity.

The concepts assembled in this proposal about subjectivity are organized in such a way that the changes in one of them will imply changes in the others. These concepts represent a broad range of subjective units of different complexity, which are recursively integrated one into another. This theoretical proposal on subjectivity implies a system in movement that is configured by different ways of living different experiences. This is the basis of our definition of subjectivity as a configurational system. One subjective configuration embodies others through specific subjective senses that emerge during its course, and it is this endless process that characterizes subjective functioning.

This definition of subjectivity has the following theoretical implications:

1. Psychological functions, once they are subjectively configured, become self-generative subjective productions. This means that intellectual, motor, or any other operation become sources of subjective senses, transforming psychological functions into motives for their own functioning. Motivation becomes intrinsic to the psychological function itself. Personality, or any other concept used to refer to an individual subjective system, is configured in action, instead of being an a priori determinant of the action. In any case, subjective configurations of personality are responsible for a certain congruency that it is possible to perceive in individual trajectories. Subjectivity as a system is engaged in actions through the subjective configurations of those actions. .
2. The definition of psychological functions and actions as subjectively configured processes allows the transcendence of psychological classification based on behavioral / symptomatic entities. This stresses the understanding of behaviors and psychological “pathological entities”, such as those formulated via DSM III, IV, V and other classifications, as subjectively configured processes. This comprehension breaks down any standardization of individuals or groups as carriers of those labels. The study of subjective configurations is always a singular process.

I experienced an example of the consideration of subjective configuration instead of disorders of any kind during research with a 13 year old male adolescent. In one of the sessions, the teenager, who was trying to solve a problem used as a research tool, suddenly turned toward me in a very disrespectful way, shouting aggressively that the task he was doing was meaningless and absurd. After this episode, he left the classroom, pulling the door violently. Once the session had finished, I found him seated alone outside the classroom. I gently approached and asked: “Why were you so angry with me if I always treat you in a very respectful way?” As a reaction, the teenager began to cry in a very uncontrollable way, saying he was ashamed because he felt that he would fail in the task, making all his classmates laugh at him.

Subjective senses generated at that moment in our conversation had the same origin as those that configured his aggressive reaction during the research session. However, they were expressed in different ways in different contexts. In both cases, the aggressive reaction and his extreme sensitive reaction to my affective approach to him, these reactions were generated subjective senses related to his lack of affection, his lack of a social place in the classroom, his insecurity and anxiety related to social evaluation. These factors configured a theoretical explanation completely different to descriptive levels in use by psychology, for example to classify him as an

aggressive personality. The same subjective configuration, from which emerge low esteem, insecurity, fear and shame in one context, was the source of completely different feelings in the other context, communication being the main device of that change. This example, as with many others discussed in our line of research (Goulart, 2013; Rossato, 2009; Bezerra, 2014), demonstrates that behaviors in educative work should be understood, not by their immediate contents, but by their subjective configurations.

Any human motivation understood as subjective configuration is dynamic, variable and dependent on context; it is impossible to judge the motivation for one behavior by its explicit content. There are no motivational forces that can be understood outside the dynamic network of processes represented by the subjective configurations of one concrete experience.

3. Individual and social actions are simultaneously configured in individuals and in social scenarios within which individual actions take place, and are in tension with one another. The subjective system is not the actor of its own configurations; the actors are the individuals and social agents that actively and reflexively create their own paths, taking their own decisions during their experiences. The relevance of the concept of subject is stressed by Frosh as follows: "(...) human subjects may be 'socially constructed', but from that constructed position they exert choices which are never quite reducible to the forces that constructed them in the first place" (Frosh, 2002, p. 3).

The definition of individual and social subjects is essential to understand subjectivity from a cultural-historical standpoint. The subjective impacts of the paths, decisions and plans of the subject's ongoing activities, whether social or individual, do not result from his/her own conscious assumptions, but from the flux of subjective senses that are configured during the action, embodying the subject's action beyond any conscious intention. Conscious and unconscious, in this theoretical account, are not two separated instances; they are processes organized in two different and simultaneous moments that define two different sets of the same system. The subject of the action and the subjective configuration of the subject's action are configured by each other in such a process that transcends conscious representations and intentions.

The emphasis on the subject leads to another distinctive attribute of this theoretical proposal; the subject's actions are always engaged within systems of communication and social networks of relations. Being part of a social subjective configuration is irreducible to the individual configurations of those who interact within those systems of communication.

4. Overcoming the split between social and individual processes.

The proposal of subjectivity defended in this paper allows an advance in the comprehension of social reality, not as a blending of external influences acting on the individuals, but as multiple symbolical constructions subjectively configured in social and individual instances. The institutionalized social order exists within the living dynamic networks of individuals, groups and institutions, and is sensitive to the new forms of subjectivation generated in these networks. Subjectivity is not reduced to the individuals; it is a phenomenon that integrates all human reality, whether social or individual.

The intermingled configurations of social and individual subjectivities have been developed by me elsewhere (González Rey, 2014, 2015, 2017). My focus here lies in the fact that subjectivity, from this cultural-historical standpoint, is far from being reduced to any kind of individual



intra-psychical apparatus or structure. Subjectivity's functioning and genesis is always in process and tension within the social networks. These networks' subjective configurations, in turn, are a source of subjective senses for individuals.

## 7 | SOME FINAL REMARKS

Throughout the development of psychology, the topic of subjectivity has been a peripheral concept. However, as discussed above, different authors with different theoretical approaches have highlighted ideas and concepts that, taken together, represent an important premise for advancing toward a theory of subjectivity within a cultural-historical approach. In fact, subjectivity has largely been overlooked by philosophy, psychology and the social sciences

Subjectivity, from a cultural-historical standpoint, has an integrative function regarding the taxonomy of concepts traditionally used by psychology. At the same time, the definition of subjectivity proposed here permits an understanding of the individual subjective processes as part of cultural social realities, both of which are reciprocally configured.

This cultural-historical proposal about subjectivity essentially differs from all versions of psychoanalysis, among other things, by the fact that it recognizes human motivations as inseparable from symbolic processes and constructions. This makes it possible to advance a definition of human motivation in constant movement as an intrinsic part of current actions, performances and relations. Human motivation is intrinsic to the definition of subjectivity proposed in this paper.

This definition of subjectivity allows a transcending of the classical patterns of behavioral disorders, dysfunctional personalities or families, and psychopathological definitions on which the traditional individual and descriptive psychologies have operated. Subjectivity opens a new path to relate social symbolical productions with individuals in such a way that these two instances preserve their generative character and their own dynamics. Nonetheless, social and individual subjectivities are configured one into the other through subjective senses which, embodying the other level of subjectivity, are themselves produced by the subjective configurations generated by each of these subjectivities.

The paper emphasizes the need to open a dialogue with authors from different perspectives who are advancing the cultural-historical definition of subjectivity by other means. Subjectivity, as defined in this paper, is configured within social-symbolical, institutional and social networks, including power relations and structures of power at macro- and micro-social levels, the impacts of which on society and individuals have to be defined through the subjective configurations of individuals and social instances. Subjectivity never results directly from any social and political attributes of social functioning.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ontological definition is used in this paper as the specific theoretical constructions that permit the identification of any domain of science. On the basis of these constructions epistemological and methodological conceptions are defined which, together with the ontological definition that inspires them, form a core of scientific work.

<sup>2</sup> The quotation is referenced to its year of publication. However, that was the year in which Dembo died at the age of 92 years, which makes me think that the paper, according to its contents, was written many decades before, when Dembo was actively involved in Lewin's research into motivation and personality.

<sup>3</sup> In the last period of his work, Vygotsky defined *perezhivanie* as the unit of consciousness capable of integrating the influences of the environment and the characteristics of the child's personality. The concept of unit was used by Vygotsky as the "cell" that embodies the quality of consciousness as a whole.

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