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SENSUALITY AND SENSE: CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE HUMAN NATURE

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Human *psyche* is culturally constructed subjective reality. Sensuality is the starting condition for human adaptation, and it becomes the arena for cultural regulation of the human *psyche*. Contrary to the traditions of psychoanalysis that have emphasized the unconscious basis for the human *psyche*, a cultural-psychological analysis concentrates on the transformation of the domain of personal affect into semiotic mediation fields that regulate conduct *in toto*. Sexuality is only one of the differentiated sub-domains of sensuality, and plays secondary role to culturally organized affect in its multitude of forms. Semiotic mediation of the psychological life-worlds is socially guided—leading to the establishment of the private (personal-cultural) mechanisms of self-regulation is constrained by the Semiotic Demand Settings (SDS) of the collective-cultural input. The SDS set up the ways in which it becomes possible to bring some of the material from the hyper-generalized semiotic fields into focus of social discourse. It operates as a mechanism of social regulation at both the societal level (freedom of speech, paralleled with freedom of not listening) and at the level of individual persons. The role of SDS can be observed in the regulation of scientific discourse itself—the history of enabled talking about sexuality in psychology has led to lack of focus on the person-environment relationships in terms of sensuality.

> They looked at her openly, intently, as children and animals do, with a physical vision, measuring only physical attributes, charm, aliveness, and not titles, possessions, or occupations. Their full, complete smile was not always answered by foreigners, who blinked at such warmth of smile as they did at the dazzling sun. Against the sun they wore dark glasses, but against these smiles and open naked glances they could only defend their privacy with a half-smile (Nin 1987, 467).

This arrival scene of encounter of the customs officials and tourists in a Caribbean airport reflects the duel of cultural worlds—the one where sensuality is positively appreciated, and the other—where it is felt to be foreign and threatening, and has been turned into an object of social and personal control. The making of distinctions between the 'pure' and 'dangerous' (Douglas 1966) begins from the immediate process of perception. Cultural moralistically imbued meanings make difference within our experience.

The culturally felt 'danger' of the sensual has also clouded the perspectives of the social sciences. Here the issue is seemingly paradoxical in its own way—while these sciences have ignored the basic sensuality of relating with the world, they have made sexuality-rooted causal explanations quite legitimate. In a nutshell—a psychologist would blush if having to tell about one's own sexual experience—or sexual feelings that

were privately real in a public place. Yet the same psychologist can easily talk—in public—about how sexual issues "cause" some psychological outcomes in *other* people. Popularized versions of psychoanalytic discourse abound in many Western societies—these have an appeal to the gossip networks and advertising agencies, saturating the common sense with titillating explanations for everyday conduct. Despite the inherent appeal of such explanations they reduce—rather than enhance—psychology's explanatory possibilities. The confines of the common sense language need to be transcended (Valsiner 1985)—rather than building scientific explanations on the foundations of richness and flexibility of everyday language uses.

Sexuality talk in psychological theorizing: *pars pro toto* reversal

What is at the heart of the "sexuality talk" in psychology? Psychology has reversed the dominance of two biological functions—metabolism and sexual intercourse—by elevating the themes related with the latter to the status of generalized causal principles. However, even in the common sense universe meanings, sexuality exists as a special case of feeding. This can be easily tested on the material of what explains what else in psychology—for instance, psychological problems of eating (or breathing) are explained by psycho-sexual causes, rather than vice versa. There is ample evidence that nutritive processes are of wider importance across all of human life course than sexual functions can possibly be. Within various cultural-historical traditions it is feeding that acquires a central role in social relations (Cantile 1981; Khare 1976) as well become fields for social identity construction (Burgoyne, Clarke 1983; Cook, Crang, Thorpe 1999; Sered 1988). Last (but not least)—the very terminology used in layperson's language to describe sexuality is borrowed from the act of feeding, rather than the other way round (Stone 1951).

An evolutionary view. One can take a phylogenetic look at the issue of relative relevance of eating and sexing on human history. Processes of feeding must have played a central role in human evolution—with complex uncertainties[1] requiring development of new kinds of heuristic decision making systems ("fast and frugal heuristics"—Todd 2001) that operate sufficiently well for the survival of the organisms. Only **after** the ontogenetic survival of the juveniles of proto-hominids to reproductive age within each birth cohort would the sexual system become crucial— for the present and future generations (phylogenetic survival). Arguments along evolutionary lines need to accept the mutual relation of ontogeny and phylogeny, where the success in the survival within the former enables the continuity within the other. Sexual functions play their crucial—but life-time specific—role in that general adaptation process. It is on the general bodily functions of nutrition upon which cultural symbols of high complexity are being built—so over centuries, people have "tasted God" (Bynum 1987) or feasted with "the Devil"

[1] As Claude Fischler has pointed out about food intake in evolution: "The omnivore's paradox consists of a kind of 'double bind'. To the omnivore, any new food is a potential danger. But on the other hand, food sampling is of vital necessity, in order to adjust to new situations and maintain a wide enough range of diet" (Fischler 1980, 945)

(Stephens 2002), as well as constructed deeply felt through aversions of different foods (Simoons 1994). Thus it is not merely the pleasures of eating but also its always uncertain dangers that must have been central for anthropogenesis. The history of the emergence and survival of *Homo sapiens* sets the **processes of general affective relating of the person with the world**—or sensuality— up as the main feature of being human.

Sensuality as the human condition

Human beings saturate their life-worlds with their general affective orientation based on their sensing of the world—sensuality. The personally experienced or imagined world is filled with personal sense—the world is not neutral. Or, more adequately, the world ceases being neutral the very moment a person encounters it. The person feels into the world through all of the senses and constructs one's personal sense of that experience. This full-field encounter with the world—let us use the term sensuality to describe that characteristic of the person<>world relation—leads to the projection of further meaningful expectations for future encounters into the world. These expectations arise from immediate relating with the world—but become presented **as if** they are part of the world. It is **not** us-within-a-town that we say **"is** ugly" (or "beautiful")—the town **is supposed to be that** by our attribution.

Sensuality is the basis of all human relating with the world— ranging from immediate bodily pleasures to highest levels of aesthetic experience. All these phenomena are organized by the specifically human way of regulating one's relations with the world—semiotic mediation (Valsiner 2000, 2001b). Yet the term sensuality itself carries a historical baggage of non-neutral relationship of people with their environments.

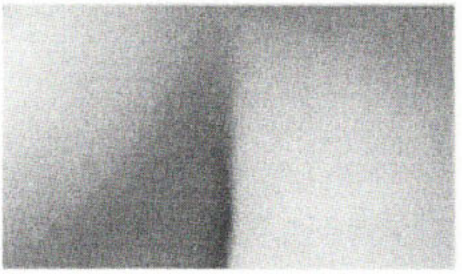
Scientific terminology versus common language. As a term meant here to belong to scientific terminology, **sensuality** is value neutral. Yet the history of the term in common language indicates its inherent value-laden nature. In the past 400 years one can observe gradual captivation of that term by the socio-moral texture of European societies. The negative nuances of **sensuality** in everyday language use prevail to the present day, where it is linked with free indulgence in carnal pleasures, lewdness. The focus on pleasure—and its negative evaluation—has been in the core of that meaning.

Coming from late Latin term **sensualis** (endowed with feeling, sensitive, open to senses), in English the term became linked with the lower nature of human beings that was supposed to be connected with lust of the flesh and other evil orientations (early 17th century England). John Milton in 1641 tried to avoid the emergence of negative moral connotations by coining the term **sensuous** to maintain the original non-moralistic nuance in the middle of purity-seeking English language users. That effort failed—at least for the Anglo-Saxon history of segregating the sensual from the socially acceptable (higher social class) standards of aesthetic beauty.

Milton's failure antedated that of psychology by some two centuries. Psychology emerged in the middle of the 19th century as a science deeply embedded within the socio-moral textures of the societies of its origin (Danziger 1990; 1997; Dolby 1977).

What was socially construed as a "problem" was flavored by the sentiments of moral evaluation and missionary re-education goals (cf. Rose 1985, on the moral functions of insane asylums and family). Psychology became a service science—a discipline that was expected to be applicable for the needs of the moral agendas as those were set within a society. It continues in that role to the present day—under the positive valuation given to applications of psychology.

The subjective reality of experiences. The world that human beings encounter is real. We encounter the world—fragmented by many socio-moral rules and superstitious meanings of the post-secular society (Luckmann 2002) by entering into a direct sensuous contact with whatever we see, hear, touch, or taste. For instance, consider the following visual scene that can be observed in public in many societies under different forms of culturally mandated covering or uncovering conditions:



The holistic image becomes immediately sensuous for a viewer—hence the question in encountering the perceptual world is not merely that of *what is it*?—but rather—*what is it* ***that I am feeling*** *while perceiving it*? The whole cannot be divided into parts—it would lose its whole-quality. It can be rationally classified—yet its role in social perception does not require that.

How would psychology deal with phenomena like this? Our usual psychologists' habit is to proclaim that our unconscious processes are brought into action in such moments. Thus,

> In his first book on Eros and the wellsprings of love, Freud posited an initial union of the two currents of *Sinnlichkeit* and *Zärtlichkeit*—the sensual and the affectionate. For Freud both flowed out of the single subterranean reservoir of the libido, that ratio-mystical pool of the sexual instinctive drives, its rivers coursing along the frontiers of the body and mind. The tender, protective stream, Freud felt, was one of desire, diverted by inhibitory dams and delaying its gratification to preserve the well-being and abiding availability of the other person. The second had an openly lustful intent, imperiously and precipitously seeking satisfaction for its own sake, a tidal rush of gut instinct (Kakar 1996, 195).

The distinction of the moral value of the lower (sensual) and higher (affectionate) currents of the Euro-centric cultural history are clearly visible in this depiction of

Freudian thought. Psychoanalytic explanations have of course been widely disputed—yet their appeal remains. It may be time for the social sciences to get out of the bondage of the posited unconscious, and try to view the immediacy of human sensuality through the lens of its organization by signs. Signs emerge—are made by active human beings—in order to deal with uncertainties of the next moment's encounter with the world (Valsiner 2003b). They organize our natural world into a cultural one.

How is human *psyche* culturally organized?

Psychology's conceptual system is largely based on common language explanations—which are our culturally guided constructions. Our common language guides us towards scientific terminology that privileges static classificatory terminology over process-oriented one, and that assumes that the most accurate way to depict a phenomenon is a node-like prototypical construction.

Common language is sufficient for common uses—but lacks the generalization and abstraction capacities that science needs. Psychology has tried to solve the problem by deriving an intermediary between phenomena and generalized universal models in the form of a myth—be it that of Oedipus or that of numerology (Porter 1995). Mathematical abstraction, in contrast, affords the generalization of the crucial features of the object of investigation.

Affective nature of human relating with the world is the most general object for psychological research. This affective nature is made cultural through semiotic mediation— culture is affectively embodied (Valsiner 2001a, 2001c, 2003a). Life encounters lead to feelings—which become differentiated into discreet emotions. The latter can be labeled and talked about in common language. Yet there are limits to that language use—under some circumstances our language fails to depict what we feel. These circumstances are of two kinds—undifferentiated sensations of the whole, or hyper-differentiated feelings that have become generalized to capture our *psyche* in full. More importantly, the latter feed forward into the next encounter with the world. Figure 1 provides a schematic picture how human beings relate to their worlds through a multi-level regulatory system.

This scheme operates in real time—it is the basis for complex dynamic intra-psychological process. Two kinds of signs—node-like (categorical) and field-like—can be seen to operate in this process. Human beings function through creating, using, maintaining, and abandoning semiotic regulation hierarchies of various kinds (Valsiner 2001a). Their personal histories are being made "on line"—in relations between immediate embodied experience (Level 0 in Figure 1) and hyper-generalized semiotic fields (Level 4) that regulate the former. Consider an example of jealousy description:

> Carl calls to tell me that since I cannot go to the party, he is taking another woman. *A twingle ricochets through my body. My stomach retracts as though it is rolling over a ball placed in the middle of my abdomen.* I recognize this response as indicating jealousy. I have felt it before. Memories of similar situations fight to get into my mind, not just the details, but also the emotions that went along with them (Ellis 1991, 24, added emphasis).

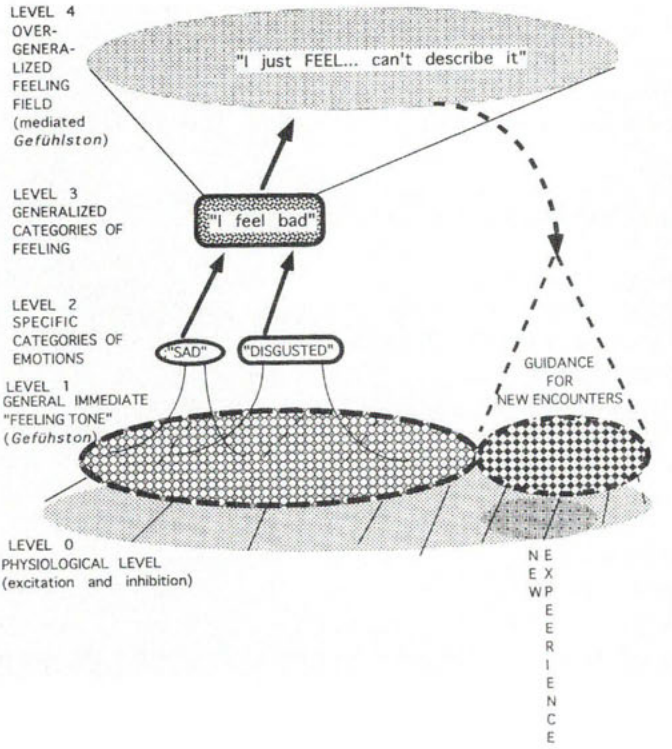


Figure 1. Semiotic regulatory system

The visceral reaction described at the news shows the immediate impact of Level 4 for regulating Level 0 → Level 1 transition. The meaning of "taking another woman" is based on the over-generalized feeling. In the immediate analysis, the person recognizes the emerged feeling as "jealousy" (Level 2)—based on re-enactment of previous memory episodes. The crucial feature of the scheme is the feed-forward (or better called **feel-forward**) orientation of the person. Level 4 hyper-generalized semiotic field not merely **re**-presents the past experiences (in a general form) but **pre**-sents those experiences for further encountering of the world.

Verbal processes as intermediate. The Level-4 regulation of the psyche through an over-generalized field has been called upconscious—in rhetoric contrast to the unconscious (Valsiner 2003a). One of the implications of the focus on upconscious regulation of human conduct is setting up the appropriate place for verbal modes of mediation (discourse, narratives). Verbal encodability of experiences remains important—after all, Homo sapiens is the talkative species. Yet the role of language-mediated relating with the world is not the highest level in the semiotic mediation hierarchy—but an intermediate one. As seen in Figure 1—with the move of the affect

mediation process to each higher level, the verbal encodability of the affective flow is at first enhanced (move from Level 1 to Level 2 and Level 3), but is subsequently diminished, and disappears (Level 4).

This U-shaped function leads us to a seemingly paradoxical view on the main vehicle of semiotic mediation—the role of words. Words are of course major means of inter-personal communication—but their role within the intra-personal communication is subservient to the feel-forward system of self-regulation by way of hyper-generalized semiotic fields. The latter may carry the function of values and duties (Moghaddam, Slocum, Finkel, Mor, Harré 2000)—a very human social phenomenon that we appreciate—yet fail to capture in words. Furthermore—values and duties become socially suggested through communication processes within a society—their emergence, maintenance, and dissipation is socially canalized.

Social directing of value construction: Semiotic Demand Settings (SDS)

Why do human beings talk? The crucial part of this question is its converse issue—why do they ***not*** talk on some occasions, and about some subject matters? Why would they blush while talking about some topics, or feel they just cannot bring themselves to utter some words in public? It is not a cognitive deficiency—lack of knowledge—that stops them (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994). Nor is it mere following of a social convention. Instead, these are the Level 4 hyper-generalized feelings field that regulates what a person can bring oneself to say in which social settings.

The semiotic mediation system described in Figure 1 is that of the intra-psychological variety—or pertaining to the **personal culture** (Valsiner 2000). The counterpart of personal culture in the public domain is **collective culture**—the set of externalized semiotic means, encoded in uttered speech and culturally formed objects—that regulates human conduct. It is within the collective-cultural domain that the directions of human development are negotiated. Based on inter-individual communication within culturally structured environments, persons assemble their unique personal cultures that—further externalized—become parts of the collective culture.

Within the social world, the communication processes are directed. The use—as well as non-use—of semiotic mediators is socially guided and personally created through the constraining system of **Semiotic Demand Settings** (SDS). The SDS is the meaning structure that guides persons' feeling, thinking and acting in their environments (Valsiner 2000, 124; 2003). It sets up guidance for how the persons are expected to view what happens with them in their relations with the environment (Figure 2).

Figure 2 describes a two-level system of the SDS—entailing that of actions and meanings. First, the historically set social orientation towards the whole field of life events guides the meaning-making system to carve out some of the events, creating a target event structure (suggested focusing). For example—any human being monitors one's relation with the environment on a constant basis—is **this next** setting DANGEROUS? Can I enter it? Can I make the next step without falling down? Is this food rotten? Is it well cooked?

However, the person is not left to one's own devices—the human world entails guided and guarded (see Valsiner 2000, chapter 11)—the person is given suggestions

about the nature and value of the next experience one may encounter. Some institutional social suggestion brings into persons' ordinary self-monitoring a new meaning structure that become highlighted as socially normative for attention. Previously, the particular meaning may have been known—but not attended to. With the SDS focused on it, it becomes a theme for promoted talking (and thinking)—and, eventually, of feeling. Guided talkativeness enforces people to overhear their own (and others') talking that guides the internalization of the values involved. Yet the new values at the intra-personal levels become assembled as hyper-generalized semiotic fields (Level 4 in Figure 1).

Our contemporary societies are regularly producing socially accentuated worries for persons. New "health concerns" are being constantly created (e.g., "level of cholesterol", "effects of hormone replacement therapy", "health risks due to smoking" etc.). The SDS is set up to get persons to focus their public talking—and intra-psychological deliberations—on a particular issue and in a particular way. Prior to introduction of such focusing structures there was no reason to enter into discussions about any of these issues—cholesterol and hormones were raging through human bodies, and persons were enjoying their cigars or cigarettes. Now, after exposure to the SDS, the personal feelings about the issues become different. Not only do many non-smokers rationally "understand" the health dangers of smoking—they may begin to **feel** negatively towards smokers. They have internally reconstructed the public talk into a personal value of hyper-generalized kind. They have gone beyond the information—and suggestion—given.

The SDS may set up different conditions for talkability of issues—some are monological (one and only one way of talking about an issue—usually in moral realms), dialogical (opposite viewpoints involved within the SDS—as depicted in Figure 2—see Hermans 2001, 2002), or polyphonic (many different perspectives encouraged). Yet all of these different versions share one common structural feature—there exists a bounded zone that is "off limits" for public discourse (zone of "taboo" of talking in Figure 2). The suggested activity within the SDS is bounded by the elimination of access to some areas of talkability.

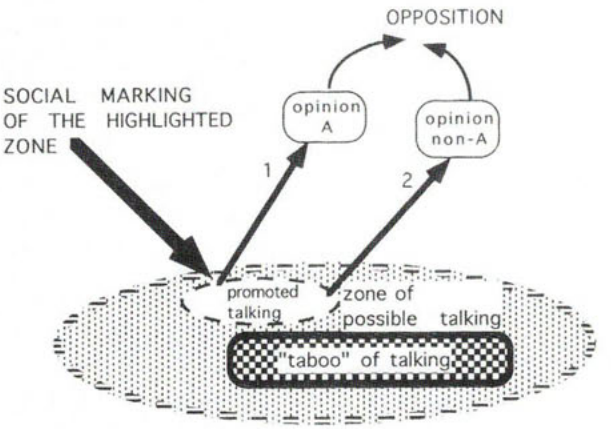


Figure 2. The Semiotic Demand Setting (SDS)

The suggested focusing upon a certain sub-field of action brings with it a suggested area of which ways to think and talk about such actions. In short—social suggestions set up both the field of the highlighted object of reflection:

{THIS IS WHAT YOU ATTEND TO}

and the "game rules" how to deal with it

{THIS IS
HOW YOU SHOULD
FEEL/ THINK/ SPEAK
ABOUT IT}

Furthermore, the specification of the latitude of suggested ways of feeling and speaking immediately entails its opposite (see Josephs, Valsiner, Surgan 1999)—the meaning field of non-A emerges with the field of A. A boundary between {how I can—and should—think about X} and {ways in which I should not think about X} becomes established. This boundary may lead to a dialogical opposition between the manifest and latent parts of a dialogical system (Gupta, Valsiner 2003). For example, the status of a substance—such as tobacco—may seem inherently fixed. It certainly is so in our contemporary societies where "smoke free" places are being set up everywhere, and where the few remaining adherents to the "health risk" of smoking are scolded and re-educated by the morally pure majority groups. However, cultural history of smoking (e.g. Corti 1996) gives evidence of tension between one of the opposites (mandatory or preferred smoking, or equally mandatory abstinence from smoking) and its hidden counterparts to be constantly there. The opposites to the accepted meaning (e.g. "smoking is a vice") actually maintain the publicly visible meaning. Until it is reversed—the case of tobacco is particularly good as historically there have been various reversals of its meaning within the opposition of NUTRIENT <> POISON (Gupta, Valsiner 2003). While being fixed on the POISON side in our present social discourses, tobacco has been (and continues to be) a NUTRIENT (or MEDICINE) in some of the solutions of the dialogical opposition.

Here the result is **latent dialogicality** of the meaning-making system—what is publicly visible in talk looks monological, yet it has a hidden counter-part in relation to which the repeated public statements operate. Many of the seemingly monological meanings that are propagated in the public domain (e.g., "fighting terrorism", "providing aid" etc.) are of such latently dialogical kind. Their current form may reverse to its opposite under some conditions, and the current maintenance of dialogicality may lead to manifest monologicality. Thus, a person who keeps saying (to others) "I am fine" (as in the usual greeting ritual in the U.S.) is creating a monological façade behind which the dialogical opposition between the positive façade and its opposite internal state of affairs can escalate to a psychological breaking point.

Paradoxical implications: when talking is not talking

The notion of SDS leaves us with a curious situation— activity within the zone of promoted talking may be actually a form of silence—about something that is carefully kept within the "talking taboo" domain. This may be illustrated by way of numerous TV talk shows, endless confrontations about social positioning by different experts on topics familiar to the audience, and deep belief that freedom of speech in a country guarantees freedom of thought. It need not—the experts may be confronting one another from socially allowed opposite opinion positions (A and non-A in Figure 2). They agree to disagree—in public, on issues of non-essential relevance—thus participating in the cover-up of some topic by hyper-talkative clashes of the **acceptable** differences of opinion. It is not surprising that some members of a given society—adolescents, for instance (see Valsiner 1997; van Hoorn, Komlosi 1997)—assume a non-participatory role in relation with the activities framed by SDS.

Our story now returns to its beginning—as in any social system, SDS is operational in setting the stage for which ideas are used in building a theoretical perspective in a science, and how. The sexuality/sensuality contrast may be viewed as indicative of a SDS that—over the past 150 years—has made "sexuality talk" promoted (both in its psychoanalytic, and psychoanalysis-critical, forms—A and non-A in Figure 2). At the same time such discursive endorsement of sexuality has left the wider meaning system—sensuality—out of researchers' focus. The common-sense negative value of sensuality in the European meaning traditions, together with its nebulous (imprecise—from the angle of node-type scientific terminology) character, have not made sensuality into a socially acceptable starting point for psychology's scientific terminology. The affective nature of the sensuality notion has not been productive for its use in a rationalistic buildup of psychology's terminology. The result of all these factors operating together is the oversight of a vast field of psychological phenomena—a kind of conceptual "blind spot" of psychology as science. In some ways there is a divide between social scientists and their phenomena—the sensuality of the latter becomes "talked away" in the efforts of the former. Poets and novelists will prevail—one can hope—which may show the fortitude of the human nature.

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