

Work and culture: Approaching cultural and work psychology

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journals.sagepub.com/home/cap**Pedro F Bendassolli**Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil;
Aalborg Universitet, Denmark**Abstract**

In this article, we aim to explore the potential consequences of an approach to the theme of work that lies between culture psychology and work psychology. We argue that culture and work, considered as entities, have suffered from a process of mutual distancing over the course of history. Our first argument is to show the fallacy underlying this distancing, by arguing that culture is not an entity, but rather a process by which we use signs as tools to mediate our relationship with the environment and to regulate our own action in irreversible time. We also argue that work is a sign-mediated activity that occurs through culture. Most importantly, we advance the urgency of considering work as a cultural phenomenon, whose specific role is to make culture by getting things transformed into objects. The second argument we put forward is that work is a meaning-making complex. We further develop this concept by claiming that work should be analysed at the general level of the semiotic principles of meaning-making.

Keywords

Culture and work, meaning-making, work meaning, meaningfulness in work

For a work psychologist and some researchers dealing with work issues, the first encounter with researchers in the field of the Cultural Psychology (CP) of semiotic mediation (e.g. Valsiner, 2007, 2014)¹ can be unsettling. First and foremost, this is due to an awkward absence. For instance, from a search for the years 1995 to 2016 in the most important journal in the field, *Culture & Psychology*, using the keywords ‘culture’ and ‘work’ in all search fields, we retrieved 595 papers, of which only three deal with work-related topics, namely: professional learning (Daniels, 2011), stress (Kirkegaard & Brinkmann, 2015) and youth unemployment

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(Pultz & Hviid, 2016). We also found some mention of work in Valsiner (2015a), although this analysis is not exactly about work but rather about the emergence of novelty in organizational dynamics. Another quasi-exception is Valsiner (2007), in which we can find two or three paragraphs devoted to work (as a goal-oriented activity and as a support for socialization).

Beyond that absence, the unsettled feeling most likely arises because, habituated to a certain anthropology inspired by Marxism (despite the probability that this ‘Marxist tone’ may already have become outmoded to many work psychologists), we tend to think of work as a central activity in human lives. Many of us belonging to the field of Work Psychology (WP) think that work is a good candidate for being able to embody the high-level psychological functions that are so important to CP (e.g. Bendassolli & Gondim, 2014, 2016; Clot, 1999; Dejours & Deranty, 2010). As a consequence, work should be considered as the first choice route through which human beings grasp and master nature and transform it (and itself) by infusing this dynamics with meaning.

The roots of the unsettled feeling regarding CP probably go much deeper. CP tries to be one type of meta-psychology, or a general psychology, as Valsiner (2015b) has already designated it. It is intended to analyse culture from the perspective of the human agent trying to make sense of the fact of living in an irreversible time and being unable to escape from the semiosphere that he or she has built and that enables him or her to deal with the present, digging into the past through the lenses of an anticipated future.

Actually, the reason why we would expect CP researchers to devote more attention to work probably comes from precisely this far-reaching *corpus* and ambition to be a general psychology for our times, and a contra-hegemonic psychology – since we believe that work is the ‘perfect’ field for someone trying to do nonmainstream psychology, considering all the political and social challenges currently associated with work that compel psychology to position itself, for instance, against some negative side effects of the current neo-liberal ideology (unemployment, untenable work conditions and moral harassment, among other issues). So we can ask: why has this new general psychology almost never chosen work as a topic of interest? Is it because work is not considered part of the culture? By chance, could CP somehow be caught by the same process that lead to some mechanistic views splitting culture & work in the Western intellectual tradition?

However, we can take advantage of this unsettling feeling of being at the threshold of a general-but-non-work-inclusive psychology. The feeling can move us one step forward, to foster at least two critical reflexions. First, concerning the perspective that always thought of work as being a vital and central sphere of our lives – i.e. work centrality, both psychological centrality (work determines who we are, our identity, our self-value and our existential sense) and social and moral centrality (our character relies on work/job we perform). Indeed, CP may not have fully considered work in its formulations because it is envisaged as only one context among many for theoretical inquiry. For instance, could work be a fundamental phenomenon like psychological development (a major topic studied by CP)?

Or might work be only a context for applying theoretical frameworks developed in other, more basic or general psychology? As we discuss in this article, the answers to these questions depend on the distinct levels at which the theorization process is supposed to be connected to the selected phenomenon that is under investigation.

Second, a reflection on the tendency to think of work as something related primarily to the economic sphere, where it becomes a means of producing goods and services. This tendency considers work only in its capacity as a *job*, i.e. a particular form of organizing work (as an activity) under capitalistic conditions. While the previous perspective generalizes (work as something all-embracing or work centrality), this one goes in the opposite direction by holding that work is only an instrumental set of actions through which people get by. The corollary of the 'great transformation' (Polanyi, 1971) that work underwent in the last two centuries was the sharp split between culture and economy, the latter supposedly being ruled by extra-cultural principles. Since then, research on work and on culture have followed different paths, with countless attempts to build a bridge between them yet *while considering each of them as unique and bounded entities*.

This brings us to the main objective of this article, which is to advance the argument that *work is a cultural phenomenon*. We believe that this theoretical repositioning of work as a cultural phenomenon may contribute to surmounting two supposedly antagonistic views: on the one hand, the view according to which work is 'a determining cause of' culture (work centrality); and, on the other hand, the view that work is 'determined' by culture (work as a by-product of culture). We posit that this antagonism creates artificial boundaries and vertical hierarchies between two phenomena that are deeply connected, as well as rigid borders between the CP and WP domains. We set forth two supportive arguments.

The first is that the position occupied by work in relation to culture should once again be reconsidered. Therefore, our first task will be to try to reconsider the work–culture relationship, drawing on the CP axiom of the *centrality of the experiencing person* and the overwhelming role of signs. The second argument advances the concept of work as a *meaning-making complex*. Based on the idea of the generality of the semiotic mediation process (Valsiner, 2014), we will present and discuss the constitutive elements of such a complex. We will try to show how, as a meaning-making complex, work plays both a psychological (personal culture) and a social (collective culture) function.

Culture against work

Just over 40 years ago, the sociologist Daniel Bell, recognized for his analysis of so-called post-industrial societies, admitted that the relationship between socio-economic structures and culture was the most complicated subject in his field (Bell, 1972). He also asserted that Marx's idea of culture as a 'reflection' of economy had been supplanted by the increasing autonomy assumed by culture, given a radical social change in the image of the artist as a powerful tastemaker. Culture had thus become a self-defining entity and, at some point, had begun to *stand against* (as an

‘adversary’, in Bell’s words, p. 30) the social structure defined by economics, technology and occupation. In Bell’s text, culture is nearly synonymous with *art*. Work (bound to economy) appeared to be an alien activity in this new cultural landscape.² This kind of analysis extends through time and is still present, in a more expansive scope, in cultural studies and beyond.³

In a similar context, two positions need to be highlighted regarding the work–culture relationship. The first position is posited by Habermas (1975) in a remarkable essay that reflects upon Marx’s materialistic theory of work and its role in explaining social evolution. According to Habermas, work can be analysed in terms of three distinct actions: instrumental, strategic and communicative. But, according to him, the strategic action features more prominently than the other two actions in Marx’s thesis about the central role of work in explaining social evolution. Habermas casts doubt on this role assigned to work. If we want to understand the *specifically human* mode of reproduction of life, we need to consider communication-based domains, such as family or kinship. In other words, we need to understand the role played by *language*. Accordingly, we may conclude that work (instrumental and strategic action-driven) and culture (communicative action-driven) are ruled by different rationalities. This position has opened a huge debate over the last decades concerning the role of language in the world of work.

The second position follows a similar thought, although with a hermeneutical tone. Paul Ricoeur (1955), in a piece devoted to discussing *parole* (speech) and work, went much further than Habermas by straightforwardly asserting that ‘(...) the essence of language escapes to the nature of work: the language signifies; it does not produce’ (p. 252). This position is quite illustrative of the humour of other post-hermeneutical thinkers, despite variations over time in their positions. In ontological terms, work is not in the same position as culture-as-a-language-domain. Culture and, more specifically, language are the key tenets in the endeavour to define the human condition. We can find this notion in existentialism as well, as evidenced by Heidegger (1977) and his discussion on the colonization of the world of life (to use a Habermasian expression) by the technological spirit of modernity, where work can roughly be placed. It would be absurd to think that Heidegger’s ‘Being’ should be envisaged through the lens of work (despite his brilliant discussion on craftsmanship).

Work against culture

On the opposite end of this discussion, authors, particularly from the materialistic spectrum, are concerned with regarding work in an ontological capacity as defining our humanity. Certainly, Marx’s colossal oeuvre comes immediately to mind here. Even though it is beyond the scope of our current analysis to present an in-depth discussion of Marx, we nonetheless highlight the fact that work occupies a central role in his theorization about capitalism, and especially in his view about what defines a human being. According to Marx, work is the basis of the process of

hominization. This theoretical positioning of work can be seen in the writings of contemporary Marxist scholars. In what follows, we will discuss one of these scholars in particular: György Markus embedded in the French materialistic sociology. Although not a universally well-known *penseur*, he still serves as an example of the tradition that has advanced the sense of work centrality.

Markus is the author of the 1982 book *Langage et production* (Language and production), specifically devoted to dismantling the limits of materialism in its dealing with language. Bakhtin (1986) and Lukács (1980) are also committed to this approach, albeit with a much wider perspective (see also Lecerde, 2006). In his work, Markus argues against what he denominates the linguistic paradigm, according to which language is the universal source of all human forms of objectifications. He asserts that this hermeneutical approach misses the point about the real possibility of developing a practical attitude toward society, understood in its totality. Markus opposes this paradigm with what he calls the paradigm of production, which addresses a fundamental demand: to recognize that material production ought to stand as the cornerstone of our intellectual drive to interpret *all* the manifestations of social life.

At this point, we can identify two ideal positions embedded in this intellectual heritage, despite the caricature-like portrait, we have presented of it. To use a metaphor, the first position places culture (art, communicative rationality, language) above work, and the other places work above culture (paradigm of production). The above/below positioning is meant in the sense of a causal and transitive determination, wherein above is the *explanans* and below the *explanandum*. In between these two positions, we can identify tensions springing from the issue of what place should be assigned to work in our narratives, i.e. the idea of the centrality of work *ipso facto*. However, we also need to ask the following question: Why should work occupy such a high-level position in a supposedly social or even psychological value hierarchy? The same applies to culture: Should we regard culture as a kind of circular metaphor wherein we could locate a stable and bounded centre? Or is culture like a *container* of all human actions (including work)?

Culture reconsidered

The two positions about work and culture that we have just depicted rely on an underlying conception according to which culture is an *entity* and work is understood (if at all) only as *abstract work*. As ideal types of work–culture relationships, we probably cannot find them in their pure form in reality, but even so, they symbolize an ongoing essentialist view that derives from Plato, as well as an essentialist and a prosopopoeial view since culture seems to be defined as a person.

When we proposed using the word *relationship* to further discuss the two phenomena (work and culture), in the introduction of this article, could this have revealed our own underlying conception of two bonded entities: culture AND work? What might the nature of this relationship be? Might it be a hyphen-like relationship (culture–work) or an interspace/liminal zone (something like

culture↔work)? If the latter, could this interspace be inclusive, in the sense of an ‘inclusive separation’ as advanced by Valsiner (2014)? We believe that recasting some core ideas from CP may help us advance towards an idea of interspatial inclusion/liminality, or at least help us to add new insights to this wide-ranging, ancient but still open-to-debate controversy.

The first and certainly the most important of these concepts is the concept of culture. From the perspective of semiotic CP, neither is culture an entity nor can it be grasped as a state-like phenomenon (a point-like sign, see Valsiner, 2007). Culture is a process, a realm of different products of the mind, such as meanings, tools and symbols. As a corollary, it is also assumed that culture has no agency. Instead, *it is the agent that acts* – this is the fundamental position of CP about the centrality of the experiencing person (personology – see Stern (1938). The agent invents tools and signs and metasigns that regulate, in turn, this same action of making use of tools and signs (Valsiner, 1999). As Valsiner (2014) puts it, ‘Culture does not cause anything, yet human beings operating through culture in goals-oriented ways re-organize their worlds’ (p. 35).

Culture, as long as it is composed of signs, offers us a challenge: neither can we avoid or escape from these signs nor can we react to culture as if it were an invisible gas acting upon us – as something standing outside us. Culture is inside us; it is not an environment (at least not in the sense of a natural or given one). Culture is the result of the central human ability to make meaning (and to be overdetermined by it), which is used by the agent to encode the environment and infuse it with meaningfulness.

Additionally, signs have the double function of distancing us from the here-and-now and, at the same time, of making us forget their own existence. The latter function can be responsible for the fact that we do not need to think all the time about how to act in specific situations or settings. Of course, this would be completely different in a crisis situation, in transitions, or when signs help us, as goal-driven agents, in our endless effort to anticipate the future and negotiate the tensions and ambiguities that we face in the irreversible time.

Work through culture

However, the same take-for-granted characteristic of living through signs may be epistemologically misunderstood, giving rise to the above/below metaphor. Culture and work cannot be placed in a transitive above/below position because, first, culture has no centre as long as it is not an entity and, second, we cannot put ourselves (as meaning-making agents) above or below signs, either in ontological terms (as some truth beyond the signs – our ‘true self’, as Wittgenstein denounced when he discussed the myth of private language) or in methodological terms (linear causality – signs as entities causing our behaviour outwardly, from above). All we can do is keep moving and inventing sign hierarchies that, despite having been created by ourselves, may take control over us in a process of semiotic regulation. In the same way, work should not be placed above culture

because work is a sign-regulated activity as well, caught in the same ambiguous and uncertain nature of signs (no 'centre', no bounded border). So, how should the interspace between culture and work be envisaged from a (cultural) psychological point of view?

If we understand culture as a semiosphere and follow the assertion that culture is, at same time, inside us (by internalization) and is made by us through externalizations – for instance, externalizations through work – in an in-between dynamics (inner-outer) (Valsiner, 2007, 2014), or interspace, then culture and work are embodied in the same generic process of meaning-making through signs. They cannot be considered to be entertaining a *causal relationship* between them, at least not a linear, one-path, causality. Culture and work relate with each other in an inclusive separation mode as this concept has been developed in CP (Valsiner, 2004). Their borders are made by signs, and these signs move all the time as a result of the agent actions of irreversible time.

Turning back to our idea of interspace and liminality, we can advance the following: (a) Researchers need to conceptualize the phenomenon under investigation by using discriminating strategies. Such a conceptualization shows that culture and work are only apparently separate entities, due to the operation of intellectual and discursive processes; we will develop this claim in the next section. (b) At the level of the semiotic processes, however, both work and culture are hyper-generalized signs (Valsiner, 2014), i.e. all-embracing ones, providing the context for other meaningful concepts and connections.

Elaborating further on this topic, we claim that the interspace between culture and work corresponds to a dynamic process of meaning-making, with permeable boundaries between the two. At a more general level, culture operates as a catalytic sign, bringing to the acting person symbolic tools in the form of suggestions, contra-suggestions and myths (and counter-myths), constraining the flux of their possible actions (circumvention signs) or promoting other actions (promoter signs) (Valsiner, 2014). In its way, work is an activity carried out *through* culture. This means that when we are engaged in work, we are catalysed by culture, in the sense of making use of these symbolic tools and adopting some direction for our own actions.

For instance, the formal education through which a future professional is prepared to perform specific tasks corresponds to a series of symbolic resources made available to her in the form of instructions, norms, procedures and how-to advice. These are normally embedded in books and are also co-produced in the process of interacting with professors, other professionals and colleagues. While working, this same professional is also supported by a body of accumulated knowledge (not necessarily a formal one) that canalizes her efforts towards some goals and shapes her actions in order to reach these goals. As a sign, culture mediates the relation between the subject and the parts of reality to be transformed through work as an activity. Our challenge in the next sections is to further discuss what exactly culture *is* within work and what work *is* within culture. We tackle the issue by advancing the thesis of work as a *meaning-making complex*.

Work as a liminal concept?

Before developing the argument that work should be considered a meaning-making complex within culture, we need to set forth some crucial epistemological issues related to the similarities and distancing in the CP↔WP ‘in-between’ zone, or put in other words, between work and culture interspace taken in a disciplinary level. To a certain extent, CP and WP can be seen as much closer than they might appear at first glance. Indeed, there seem to be some crucial and strategic points of intersection between them, which might be surprisingly familiar to some branches of work psychologists – for instance, to those working on the Psychodynamics of Work (Dejours, 2013) and on the Clinic of Activity (Clot, 1999), approaches that have both been developed in the French work psychology context. In both cases, work is understood as supporting crucial psychological functions.

One example of the previous assertion can be gleaned from a chapter of Valsiner’s last book (2014, chapter 7), even if he never uses the word *work*, nor any of its synonyms, in this chapter, the goal of which is to discuss how *culture is made through objects*. The similarity shows up immediately, considering that the primary goal of work, useful labour (Marx, 1887), is to mediate the exchanges between human beings and nature toward making (useful) objects to afford human life and, at same time, embody culture. We extract four core ideas from Valsiner’s (2014) chapter:

- We *make* things. And through those things we *modify ourselves*. Furthermore, we *decide upon the fate of things we have made* – keep them or abandon, adore them, destroy them or pass them on to others (...). These three notions – make, modify and maintain – are sufficient to specify how the human species differs from most others (...) (p. 135, emphasis in the original);
- It is educating the perception-action system – the eye, the ear and, most importantly, the hand – that has made it possible to create and maintain the enormous overload of human-created objects (...) (p. 136);
- In the invention and manufacture of human tools is the functional fit of the material and the goal of a human-made thing that mattered. The very first act of creating a cultural tool (...) required transcending the immediate affordances of the things (p. 141);
- We turn things in objects. These objects do not merely exist – they *resist* our efforts to act upon them (p. 153, emphasis in the original).

Looking at a famous passage from Marx’s *The Capital* that has probably inspired some work psychologists in their definition of work (even if indirectly), we can observe a similar ‘sign field’, despite the word *labour* being used in this case. Marx (1887) wrote:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man *of his own accord* starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He *opposes* himself to Nature as one of her own forces,

setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. (...) what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. (p. 128, emphasis added)

Comparing these extracts, we feel as though we are looking at the same (or broadly similar) phenomenon (X = work), but described with a CP-proper narrative (Y) rather than with a similar (but still non-overlapping) narrative of the sort we use in some branches of WP, inspired by this theoretical repertory drawn from Marx (Z), here used just as a prototypical example. Could this similarity exist simply because we can posit a single, shared phenomenon and then compare the narratives *qua* equivalents (Y ↔ Z → X)? This question is of vital significance in order to improve our understanding of the *liminalities* between CP and WP regarding work as a cultural phenomenon.

Work < > Non-work

At a first level of analysis, as we have already suggested, we can say that these liminalities exist due to distinct uses of theoretical tools – an epistemological issue. Employing different narratives to build upon the phenomenon is a current practice in science. These tools canalize the researcher's attention to some parts of the phenomena, which are then used as facts, and not to others. Phenomena are objectified (or externalized) into language through the process of sign construction and its oppositions (A < > non-A). As a consequence, researchers themselves operate *through* culture as a sign, being guided by culture as a reservoir of symbolic resources. In the same process, they also make culture through their externalizations.

Therefore, at a semiotic level of analysis, we can assert that culture has acted over time as a catalyst in the process of making distinctions between work < > non-work. In this case, there is not only an epistemological issue at stake, but also a 'work of culture', to use an Obeyesekere (1990, p. 55) key concept. Researchers are oriented by culture to use certain sign complexes rather than others.

The same could be said about the current difficulties faced by people in general in trying to define what work is and what it is not – for example, in between the family/work borders, formal/informal, home-based/organizational-based, retirement/non-retirement and paid/non-paid work borders. These borders have practical implications. For instance, if someone considers that work at home is not work at all, they can accept the work much more than they would if they described the situation as an invasion of work into family time. And the opposite also seems to be true: conceiving work as home-based implies that there is no invasion of work into one's private life, since it is inwardly reconstructed as a home activity. In this process, the borders of what work means are enlarged in such a way as to include, for instance, parenting and housekeeping.

However, if the borders between work < > non-work are at least partly determined by the way that researchers (and people in general), catalysed by culture, make meanings and come up with conceptual distinctions, how can we define work in a broader sense, as a cultural phenomenon? At this point, we reach the second argument brought up in the introduction, concerning our understanding of work as a meaning-making complex.

The meaningful functions of work

As a cultural phenomenon, and from a CP point of view, work could be said to be an arena for an individual's process of making meaning out of her relation with the environment. Through work (mediated by signs), organisms pre-adapt themselves to this environment, by anticipating the future in the present. At this level, we must bear in mind a crucial difference between work as a job, i.e. as a particular arrangement that emerged together with the capitalist system in the 19th century (that is to say, a specific cultural arrangement), and work as a meaning-making activity, by which we struggle not only to survive as a species or individuals but also as culture-making, future-oriented creatures.

It follows from this definition that work is a cultural phenomenon, because it plays the function of making culture through objects, engaging human agents in goal- and means-directed activities aimed at transforming the natural environment into an *Umwelt* (Chang, 2009), i.e. an agent-centred environment. Through work, agents also *resist* the *affordance* of these same objects (a stand against, or *Gegenstand*) (Valsiner, 2014, p. 153) when their action faces an obstacle and they create a counter-action (resistance) to the obstacle. Work encapsulates a specific meaningful setting in which active human agents make meanings and use them to regulate their activity. Once built, these meanings are then incorporated into the collective culture.

By defining work in this way, we are introducing a major distancing from some current approaches in WP. For instance, there is an entire branch of research on the 'meaning of work' (e.g. Meaning of Work International Research Team (MOW), 1987). Overall, research based on MOW's model is focused on meaning *qua* quasi-static predicates – e.g. work is a way to make money, work represents suffering, work is a source of self-realization, among others. These predicates are cultural markers concerning what work means, and they are important elements *qua* social representations.

Researchers need to go beyond this manifest level and get into the meaning-making level as a general semiotic process of organisms relating to their environment. Otherwise, it would be difficult to explain an agent's actions or even high-level psychological processes embedded in work as a cultural phenomenon, as a meaning-making complex. In the next sections, and based on Figure 1, we will spell out three features of this complex: (a) the role of the active agent, (b) the role of signs in work as a mediated activity and (c) the core process by which things (nature) are transformed into objects (culture).

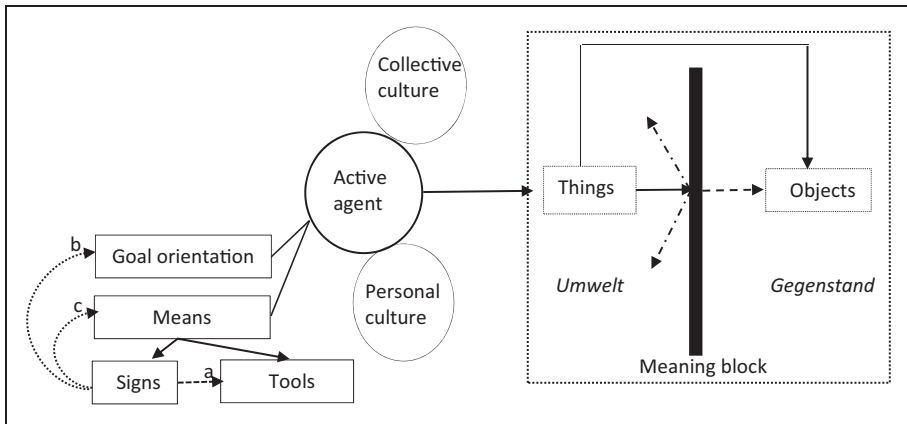


Figure 1. Work as a meaning-making complex.

Source: Elaborated by the author based on Valsiner (2007, 2014).

Work as an agent-driven activity

The model proposed in Figure 1 assumes that the person is the active builder of meaning, and, in the case of work, is the active agent that *invests herself* in a goal-oriented activity through which things get transformed into objects. In this sense, work is a specific set of actions implying a movement of the agent from inside to outside herself, toward other persons, things and the activity itself – triggered by internal meaning structures and canalized by external norms, constraints and promoter and circumvention signs. Work is a multi-directed activity (Clot, 1999).

The person brings culture, both personal and collective culture, to her work. She works *through* culture, and culture is made *through* work. Therefore, the active agent enters into work embedded in two, non-isomorphic manifestations of culture. The personal culture is related to the singularity and uniqueness of the person. It is built through a constructive process of internalization. This process draws on the semiotic material (symbolic resources; Zittoun, 2007) available in the meaningful environment where the person lives (her *Umwelt*).

In contrast, through a constructive externalization process, the person transposes the semiotic material (inner meaning structures based on value and hyper-generalized affective field signs) to the realm of external action. Through externalization, the agent objectifies meaning into actions, at the same time infusing the collective culture with new meanings. In turn, the collective culture is the stock of symbolic resources available for action. In WP, we can find a similar idea in the *genre professionnel* (professional genre; Clot, 1999, 2009). Such a *genre* represents all the norms, obligations and references, i.e. the collective memory, of a specific *métier* that canalizes action in work. In the present context, we could also ‘translate’ Clot’s professional genre as semiosphere.

Work as a meaningful setting

The large box in Figure 1 depicts our main idea of work as a meaning-making process. It is based on Valsiner's (2007) re-elaboration of Vygotsky's Method of Double Stimulation. As can be seen in the figure, work implies a non-linear relationship between things and objects, sustained by the goal-directed action of the agent in a meaningful setting fed by semiotic elements – tools and signs. By making use of signs, the active agent regulates the selection or construction of tools (Figure 1(a)), makes meaning for the act of pursuing the goal (Figure 1(b)), and makes meaning for the persistence (motivation) towards the goal (Figure 1(c)). The goal pursued can be established by the agent herself (auto-determination) or by others (hetero-determination). Even when hetero-determined, this goal needs to make sense to the agent.

To say that work takes place in a meaningful setting means that the agents need to deal with a complex semiotic situation, with impediments or resistances, tensions, ambiguities and sometimes opposing possibilities in the course of their action. However, these elements are not 'objective' ones, in the sense of something that could be 'isolated' in the work environment or inside the personality of the agent. They are *intrinsic* to the activity and are *meaningful* by nature. They are not given, but continuously elaborated and re-elaborated by the agent through dialogical processes. This positioning is quite different, for instance, from the 'work conditions' tradition in WP. This tradition usually thinks of work as taking place in objective settings, where several elements, such as work load, psychosocial risk factors, temperature, luminosity, technology, organizational culture and so on, can be found. These elements are believed to *act upon* the agent.

In a different direction, we assert that the work setting is a meaningful one because the agent needs to struggle with meaning blocks, not simply with objective and 'natural' constraints. Meaning blocks are meaningful barriers interposed in the course of the process of getting things transformed into objects. Meaning blocks may originate from several sources. The collective culture is one such source, as long as it brings to the work setting, by means of the agent, different semiotic situations.

For instance, this meaning block could play a circumvention role (Valsiner, 2014), when a particular direction of feeling or thinking is reversed or suppressed in the stream of consciousness. As a consequence, a range of possible action courses (ACs) that could come along with the transformation process (things → objects) are not observed. The agent needs to struggle with the opposition between the emerging AC 1 and non-AC 1, with sign oppositions, and with the ambiguous meanings attached to them. We provide some examples to clarify this idea. First, an individual who is faced with different options in a decision-making process needs to choose one direction instead of another, each of these with practical implications and sometimes irreversible ones. Second, even if an organization offers its workers a series of prescriptions regarding the 'correct' way to accomplish the tasks assigned to them, there is a range of possibilities that emerge as the workers actually engage themselves during the course of the task accomplishment.

Ultimately, it is up to the workers to decide the more suitable way to approach some of these tasks, based on their previous experiences, their imagination, their decision-making or even trial and error. Some work psychologists differentiate between *prescribed work* (usually prescribed by the organization) and *real work*, meaning what happens while people are trying to figure out how exactly to carry out their work (Bendassoli & Gondim, 2016). For some researchers (e.g. Dejours, 2013), work dynamics can be analysed based on this gap between prescription and reality.

Similarly, Clot (1999) draws a line between the realized activity (course of action effectively pursued) and the *réel de l'activité* (the real of the activity), the latter representing all the possible courses of action not followed by the agent, but still alive in the agent's mind, *qua* potentialities. As a consequence, work psychologists should focus not only on what has happened in work (past), but mostly on what could or should happen (future). Work can be done by means of equally possible courses of action; there is no best or the only correct way to perform a task. In this sense, work is not merely a matter of applying technical prescriptions (i.e. of following normative instructions regarding how correctly have the tasks done) – if it were only this, what would then remain for the person to do that a machine couldn't do better? It is not an accident that a lack of autonomy to shape work according to the worker's imagination, competencies and desires is frequently reported as a core element hindering the promotion of healthier job conditions (e.g. Dejours, 2013).

The second possibility is that of the meaning block playing a promotion role. In this case, the agent's action can be canalized by the collective culture signs in such a way as to help her accomplish the action (the straight arrow). Similarly, the process of facing the meaning block can lead to innovative and creative forms of work, i.e. ways of dealing with the activity of transforming things into objects (see the bypassing path in Figure 1). In this latter case, the meaning block is re-invented by the agent. In both cases, how can culture foster action in work through meaning blocks? The more basic way in which this could happen is through the use of tools (and also language). Sometimes a meaning block is noticed, for instance, in the process of learning how to use a new technology and in the resistances and difficulties implied by this task. There is a twofold developmental process at play here, since the person learns not only how to use and apply such a technological tool in her activity, but also how to improve this tool or even the activity itself. A tool is a material example of a culturally (meaningful) embedded device that can foster work accomplishment. Another example can be found in the relation between some musical composers and the craftsman in charge of creating new musical instruments, when the song is fit to the material tools that bring it into reality (Sennett, 2008).

Additionally, the meaning block could be a zero-sign-type (Valsiner, 2014) block. In this case, the agent could decide to give up on the situation (the arrows pointing to outside of the plane in Figure 1). This could be a conscious decision, based on an evaluation of the situation, but it could also be a forced decision, in which case we might expect to observe psychological consequences – negative ones,

like work suffering. What could make one person interpret a meaning block as a challenge to be overcome (fuelling her action towards a surmounting action), while another considers it an insurmountable endeavor? One traditional attempt is to look for the answer in interindividual differences. Take work stress as an example. Why do some people become stressed, which sometimes even evolves to burnout, while others do not? Some researchers believe that this happens because people respond differently to the *same* or *similar situations* (e.g. tough work conditions) based on their psychological backgrounds – for instance, their personalities (for a review, see Clot & Gollac, 2014). In other words, the situation remains the same, while the manifestations of stress are different because people are different (personal variability). The problem with this approach is that it ignores the inherently meaningful nature of the impediments workers face in reality (the meaning blocks). These are not the same for all people, nor are they ‘objective’, in the sense of being something out of the reach of the agent’s interpretation when using signs.

Things < > objects

What does it mean to say that things get transformed into objects? Why do we claim that this distinction should be at the core of the work meaning-making complex? This distinction probably goes back to Aristotle’s concept of four causes, posited in volume II of his *Metaphysics* (Falcon, 2015). The first cause, the material one, is roughly tantamount to ‘thing’ – for instance, the plaster of a statue. In Peirce’s (1935) terms, the thing could be associated with the Rhema concept, i.e. with the possibility. In Marx (1887), as we have seen in the quotation above, things are embedded in the realm of Nature (with a capital ‘N’). Something similar is at play in Valsiner’s (2014) interpretation, with the assertion that inanimate things have no intentionality and then advancement of the concept of *Gegenstand* – a projection of the agent into the object that resists.

The essential idea behind our comprehension of the thing is that it lies in a non-differentiated state or in a quasi-differentiated one. Consider the plaster in our previous example. What is the form of the plaster without further human intervention? Chemically, it is a powder produced by heating gypsum, a mineral. In a sense, it contains in itself a set of possibilities that depend on what the agent decides to do with it and, obviously, also on its natural (invariable) proprieties (we can’t make a plane with plaster – unless we are interested in a toy plane). Only the agent (the Aristotelian efficient cause) is able to ‘recast’ the plaster from this undifferentiated realm and take it to the realm of meaning (the final cause) – for instance, as a statue, as complex detailing for use in room interiors, or through the creation of a mural painting, such as Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling. An object is, thus, the outcome of working on a thing as mediated by culture and guided by a purposeful goal.

The transformation of things into objects is a fundamental high-level psychological operation, mediated by signs. We move from the realm of possibilities

(material cause) to the realm of intended forms or objects (the final cause). To a work psychologist, the most important point here is the fact that this entire process *only happens* because of the agentive power of the person – because of her hands, eyes and arms, to put it as Marx did, but also because of her imagination and inner personal culture. In the act of engaging in the transformative process (work) through culture, the agent is at the same time internalizing meanings (signs), using tools and other culture-based devices and externalizing new meanings through new objects.

Before materializing her thoughts in a book, a writer may have no clear idea of what her book is going to be (maybe she has only ‘things’, in a metaphorical sense, or undifferentiated elements to be built upon – memories, feelings, vague ideas, etc.). When this vague content (the things) is transformed by means of her hands (by handwriting or typing) into letters, sentences and an entire narrative, we can then say that we have an object, in the sense of something with a cultural meaning or purpose, to be used by other people (in this case, with the potential consequence of producing new feelings or ideas in the reader’s mind).

However, this transformation process does not take place without resistance. There is no work without struggle. Things and objects resist our actions. As a consequence, work implies an effort of the agent against things in order to get them transformed into objects. This resistance, as we have tried to show, can be strengthened by circumvention meaning blocks, or it can be tackled by promotion meaning blocks. In both cases, the agent operates *through* culture. The active role played by nature, or by our striving efforts to transform nature into an *Umwelt* (Chang, 2009), forces us to counter-act nature in order to create, transform or even destroy culturally formed objects. The thing < > object border is kept moving due to work. In sum, we can posit that work as an activity helps us in determining the borders between nature and culture, if we consider that things ‘pertain’ to nature and objects to culture.

Conclusion

Our goal in this article was to approach CP and WP by discussing what work means. We have argued that work and culture have suffered a process of mutual distancing over history. Culture is sometimes posited in an ‘above’ position in relation to work, associated with high-level values (creativity, innovation, meaning). In contrast, work is sometimes considered as the most important domain of human lives (the realm of practical concerns and a means to afford our material life, culture being a ‘manifestation’ of the objectivations of the means of production). We have denounced the fallacy underlying both perspectives by arguing that culture is not an entity, but a process by which we use signs as tools to mediate our relationship with the environment and to regulate our own action in irreversible time. At same time, we have also claimed that work is not an entity. Work is a sign-mediated and regulated activity occurring *through* culture. Most importantly, we have advanced the urgency of considering work as a cultural

phenomenon whose specific role is to make culture by getting things transformed into objects.

We have also put forward the concept of work as a meaning-making complex. This means that work is an activity that takes place in a meaningful setting, where we can identify signs acting as meaning blocks. These meaning blocks can play the role of promoter signs, circumvention signs or zero signs. However, despite the role played, these signs operate as mediators in the process of getting things transformed into objects. Finally, we have proposed that thing < > object borders are kept moving due to work, as long as nature plays an active role of resistance against the agent's attempts to make culture through objects.

Our analysis in this article seems to point to several fruitful implications or challenges of this first attempt to bring cultural and work psychology closer together. First, there is a methodological implication that starts with a shift from the traditional quantitative methods that are widely used in WP. These methods are based on generalizations from cumulative data derived from samples, and these generalizations overshadow the singular cases (the acting person), since the researcher's interest lies in discovering patterns and general regularities. In order to grasp the characteristics of work as a cultural phenomenon, methods need to be designed that respect the meaningful nature of this phenomenon. For instance, adopting analysis of the microgenetic and mesogenetic level implied in all the paths followed by the agent in her struggle with meaning blocks (Figure 1). Meaning shifts should then be detected, registered and associated with the agent's psychological dynamics in work. How do they deal with the resistances? Which strategies do they mobilize in this process? How do they develop new abilities and meanings through struggling with the process of transforming things into objects? How can this process be enhanced by the way people use signs (including tools)? These are only a few key questions that an idiographic methodology could address.

The second implication we would like to mention is related to the extension of the personology approach in the realm of work. On the one hand, this approach casts doubts on the 'fetish' of transforming signs (and sign complexes) into entities. Signs are empty without an agent. One consequence of this kind of consciousness about *who* actually *acts* (*through* signs) is a move from the notion of institutionalized work (prescribed work, as might be said by French ergonomists) to an agentive or personology-based notion of work. On the other hand, work is by and large a technical domain, in the sense of an arena occupied by several 'players', each of them pursuing institutionalized interests (from business to politics). Additionally, work is a battlefield between organizations (and their legal representatives) and workers, generally in an asymmetrical relationship. In this context, to use an expression of Clot (2008), we are sometimes in the presence of *travail sans l'homme* (work without a subject). How to reconcile a personology approach with an institutionalized version of work is quite a large challenge for WP. We think this should be somehow discussed beyond the *agency vs. structure* mindset.

Finally, the last implication is connected to an emphasis on meaning-making rather than only on ‘meanings of work’. We think that the widespread feeling of emptiness in current work contexts is not related to the lack of ‘meaning’, but just the opposite: it is related to the overdetermination of meaning. Today it is easier than ever to find books, magazines, advisers, consultants, ‘gurus’ and other prophets trying to sell us the ‘latest discovery’ in the matter of ‘happiness at work’. The more people seek to find meaning in work, the more they seem to lose it. Why is this happening? Why is the number of empty activities, or ‘empty labour’ (Paulsen, 2014), visibly growing around the world, especially in highly advanced societies? At the same time, why there are an increasing number of people, especially young people, who are no longer willing to work – the so-called ‘NEET generation’ (neither work nor study)? Do they not see ‘meaning’ in working? Would work be a pointless activity to them? These are all questions that a meaning-making WP could try to address in future developments.

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Notes

1. We do not include in this comment the activity theory tradition, broadly inspired by Vygotsky’s work. As examples, we could mention Engeström (1999) and Y. Clot (in France; e.g. Clot, 1999, 2008, 2009).
2. A different perspective on culture and work was developed by members of the Frankfurt School. There are also a number of studies about this relationship using ‘cultural critic’ as a base level. See, for instance, du Gay’s (1996) critique of Marx’s theory of the meaning of work; Arendt’s (1958) attempt to bring together work and culture by distinguishing labour, work and action; and studies on the changing nature of the self in new cultural practices related to work (Beck, 2002; Sennett, 2000).
3. Examples of such extension are visible in studies of post-material society (Inglehart, 1990); cultural emergence studies (Bonnell & Hunt, 1999); and – in a more fashionable way – studies that combine culture and economy, labelled under the generic ‘creative industries’ umbrella (Caves, 2000).

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