

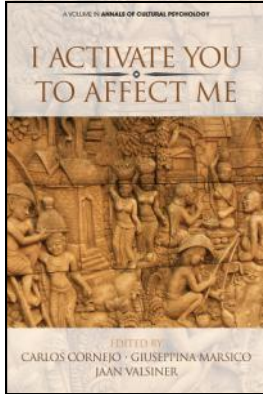
A VOLUME IN **ANNALS OF CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY**

# I ACTIVATE YOU TO AFFECT ME



EDITED BY  
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"The concept of affectivating involves two psychological dimensions often undervalued or even obliterated from contemporary cultural psychology, namely the affective involvement and the agentivity of people in their social encounters."



### I Activate You To Affect Me

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A volume in **Annals of Cultural Psychology**

Series Editors: *Carlos Cornejo, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile; Giuseppina Marsico, University of Salerno, Italy; and Jaen Valsiner, Aalborg University, Denmark*

The second volume of Annals of Cultural Psychology is dedicated to the affective nature of human social relationships with the environment. The chapters here included explore the historical, theoretical and practical dimensions of the concept of affectivating originally introduced by one of us (Valsiner, 1999), as a potential tool of inquiry into the affective-sensitive dimension of psychological life within a cultural-psychological framework. The concept of affectivating involves two psychological dimensions often undervalued or even obliterated from contemporary cultural psychology, namely the affective involvement and the agentivity of people in their social encounters.

Through several examples --'feeling-at-home', silence spaces and rituals, memorials, music and poetry, among others-- we show individual's concrete actions in mundane everyday life aim to give an affective personal sense to the world around. This focuses on the primary affective nature of human meaning construction that guides the person in one's continuing feeling-into-the-world.

At a theoretical level the notion of affectivation challenges contemporary Cultural Psychology to rescue subjectivity, not only symbolism. Affectivation propounds a return to the long, but partially forgotten, organismic tradition, represented in the history by thinkers like Wilhelm Dilthey, Jakob von Uexküll and Kurt Goldstein. Cultural psychology has to bring semiosis back to the vital background of human experience.

**Publication Date:** 2018

**ISBNs:**

Paperback: 9781641130707

Hardcover: 9781641130714

E-Book: 9781641130721

Paperback: \$45.99

Hardcover: \$85.99

**Trim Size:** 6.14X 9.21

**Page Count:** 320

**Subject:** Cultural Psychology, Affect, Expressivity

**BIC Code:** JMQ

**BISAC Codes:**

PSY000000

PSY031000

PSY017000

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Fossa, P. (2018). *Expressive dimension of human experience and affectivation process: A commentary on Everyday Phenomena and Affectivating Section*. Eds. Carlos Cornejo, Giuseppina Marsico & Jaan Valsiner. *I Activate You to Affect Me*. Annals of Cultural Psychology, Vol. II. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing (IAP).

**Expressive dimension of human experience and affectivation process:  
A commentary on Everyday Phenomena  
and Affectivating Section**

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These chapters provide a theoretical analysis of the processes of construction of meaning. With examples from everyday life, the complexity of the mutual interaction between the human being and culture—a process that generates development in an evolutive perspective—is presented.

The peculiarities of the phenomena described here are conceptualized theoretically, increasing in complexity and avoiding mechanistic simplifications of the phenomena of our own daily life experience. As has been proposed by the authors in several chapters of this subsection, human being experiences contact with the world and culture in which he or she must generate meanings to comprehend nature and the environment. In this process, human being affects and is affected by the environment. This process is called *affectivating*. *Affectivating* is a concept that realizes the emotional nature and the actions involved in the process of interacting with the environment, which is a dual process of interaction—from the individual to the environment and from the environment to the individual (Marsico & Valsiner, 2013).

As the authors describe in these chapters, the human being is a builder of meanings. In this dual process of interaction with the environment—*affectivating*—, human beings construct meaning to make sense of the experience, reducing ambiguity and uncertainty in contact with the world (Abbey & Valsiner, 2005). This process aims to make known the unknown, and to make familiar the unfamiliar, so as to develop ourselves in the environment we inhabit and to rule ourselves in it. In this process, signs that have the characteristic to account for a present experience and to anticipate a

possible (though unknown) immediate future are built (Valsiner & Van der Veer, 2000). That is, this phenomenon occurs in human experience, constantly proceeding through irreversible time.

We make distinctions, make sense and add value in the process of constructing meaning, and that process acts as a semiotic mediator of the processes of thinking, feeling, and behavior (Lehmann, in this volume). These signs have the characteristic of emerging, persisting, and disappearing, giving rise to new meanings in a constant flow of experience. This capacity for construction of signs is typical of human beings since we are beings capable of thinking of ourselves and others (Valsiner, 2014), and we have to adapt to—and sometimes to overcome—the environment to develop and continue the flow of life. In the words of Valsiner:

We are agitated when we feel “foreign” in familiar settings and we feel intrigued when in foreign settings. We make the unfamiliar familiar by our constant creation of personal sense — based on cultural meaning systems — out of any object or encounter with the world. And — when it is familiar — we create ways in which it becomes unfamiliar again—so that the intrigue of living is maintained. We fight against boredom—and overcome foreignness of the next moment of living (Valsiner, 2014, p. 13).

Every experience is characterized by its particularity and the inability to be repeated in the future. Accordingly, it is not possible to experience the same feeling and thought twice. This is how the meaning making process is deeply personal and idiographic. That is to say, it is an expressive process of human and takes part of humanity for the simple fact that humans are animated beings.

The main contribution of this volume is related to the possibility of emphasize ancient concepts and phenomena that help to understanding and study the human experience today. Through the theoretical development presented and examples from everyday life, complex human phenomena have been considered in their cognitive and affective dimensions. Some concepts developed (and others revisited) in these chapters are, for example, affectivating, proximal development zone, meaning making process, the positive and negative valence of experiences, expressiveness and physiognomy,

among others. Through the deepening of these concepts applied to the phenomena of daily life, psychological development can be described in its complexity.

The contributions of this volume primarily emphasize two areas that could be the focus of future research. First, the perception of art (music/poetry) and its relation to the phenomena of daily life is one of the articulator axis of this subsection. The authors realize a different way of perceiving environmental stimuli --namely, expressive and physiognomic stimuli-- which is a type of non-cognitive perception rather than conceptual perception. It constitutes an apprehension of the environment in a nonverbal and organismic manner.

A second major axis of the subsection is the meaning making process and how the environment promotes the development of meanings and behaviors. The environment, as a semiotic demand context, promotes the development of behaviors and meanings, while simultaneously we affect/modify the environment by making distinctions, building sense, and adding value (Marsico et. al., 2013). Thus, the creation of meanings —and thus the flow, the dynamics, the maintenance, or disappearance— depends on the context in which we are engaged (educational, religious, etc).

Rojas (this volume) returns to an old and forgotten dimension in philosophy and psychology. The author proposes re-thinking old principles of perception based on the work of Werner (Werner, 1955; Werner, 1956; Werner & Kaplan, 1963; Barten & Franklin, 1978). The Wernerian differentiation between geometric and physiognomic perception is particularly interesting for understanding the experience of music and the appreciation of the world in general. As Rojas (in this volume) points out, there are two forms of perception. On the one hand, we have a purely sensory vision based on “objective and concrete” perceptual characteristics of the object, while on the other hand, we have an organismic, emotional, gestaltic and complete view of the object. Werner developed his observations of physiognomic perception from his studies of microgenesis. Through close observation he discovered that the perception of the world has movement, shapes, colors, textures, temperature, and sensations. A well-known example given by Werner (Barten & Franklin, 1978) is the perception of a picture of a bird in the air: the geometric-technical perception could specify the height, type of flight, and direction; but in general we refer to a physiognomic appreciation: a bird flying. Also, Werner & Kaplan (1963) reported the utterances of participants who were invited to perceive words

through a tachistoscope<sup>1</sup> who communicated ideas such as “I feel something warm”, “I know! It has to do with something heavy”, etc. These expressions show that the perception of reality is more than purely cognitive-intellectual. In words of Werner, the physiognomic perception of the environment is “the indissoluble unity of form and content” (Werner, 1955, p. 20).

Abbey (this volume), meanwhile, offers an interesting perspective into the experience of perceiving poetry. The author develops a difference between the representation of poetry (literal interpretation of the meaning) and its presentation (imagined meaning). A direct relation to Werner’s physiognomic perspective (Werner & Kaplan, 1963 Barten & Franklin, 1978 Werner, 1956) is evident, which is also appreciated by Rojas (this volume). Abbey describes the physiognomic and expressive perception of art --in this case poetry. This observation is similar with the physiognomic perception of metaphor that has been described in the literature (see Cornejo, Olivares & Rojas, 2013). Metaphors and poems are forms of verbal language full of meaning. Poetic and metaphorical expressions condense meanings that in formal language must be expressed through a complex articulation of words and sentences. Metaphorical and poetic language is physiognomic in the Wernerian sense and includes an imagined meaning in the sense described by Abbey. This is what Abbey has related to the concept of *inclusive separation* (Valsiner, 2003): the meanings of poetry and metaphor have a border zone between its concrete sense and its imagined sense. That is, there is a separation point —and contact— between the conceptual space and the imagined space. While the perception of poetic metaphor emerges from conceptual expression, its meaning emerges through a phenomenon of psychological detachment. In this sense, a relationship between the chapters described herein is evident. What is physiognomic and expressive of the musical experience according to Rojas is the presentational perception of poetry described by Abbey.

Lordelo, Brandao & Bezerra (this volume) deepen the meaning making process in educational contexts. A major contribution of this chapter is to invite us to reflect on the process of constructing meaning and affectivating in the encounter between children

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<sup>1</sup> Tachistoscopic presentation has been used in microgenetic studies on perception. It involves the successive presentation of visual stimuli on a monitor from an almost imperceptible speed leading up to total appearance. Subjects perceive objects or words from something vague up to complete clarity and should relate their experience and evaluation in every phase of the presentation.

and their contexts—in this case, the child/culture interaction—, shedding light on the strategies and movements of human beings in early periods of ontogenetic development with the goal of making sense of their experiences and building their own trajectories.

From the perspective of the authors, the human being is always in a process of affectivation with the environment. Human development is understood as the incessant process of construction of meanings (Lordelo, Brandao & Bezerra, in this volume), a phenomenon by which we are always affecting and being affected by the environment. This implies affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects in the encounter with culture.

In these approaches, a theoretical coherence is observed with the proposal of cultural psychology regarding the experience in the irreversibility of time and the “stream of consciousness” in the sense described by James (1890). From cultural psychology—based on Bergson’s approach (1908) and the time as *durée*—, experience is lived in the irreversibility of time, i.e., in a permanent flow toward the future. Human development thus constitutes an unlimited meaning making process, exchanging meanings with the culture within an atmosphere in which meanings coexist prior to our existence as human beings.

Finally, Lehmann (this volume) proposes silence as a space where the meaning making process emerges in different contexts of semiotic demand settings. Different cultural contexts involve a specific meaning making process, such as temples, which demand we cross borders between one setting and another (internal and external space). Cultural settings that invite us to silence require a construction of meaning “inside”. This “innerness” is displayed as a space of construction of meaning that opposes to the externality in its semiotic characteristics. We travel fluidly between interiority and exteriority during the irreversible time. This process of constructing meaning in silence allows a space for emotional regulation and cognitive processes which are “demanded” by the semiotic context in which the subject is transiting. Reflection on the relationship between different of semiotic demand contexts which generate silence or externalization allows us to examine the processes of trajectory between the internal and external space and those who cross borders between different contexts in which the human being lives.

All chapters presented in this subsection propose a particular understanding of human development through constant person-culture interaction. Humans live the affectivation process in which they affect and are affected by the environment. In this “betweenness” space, semiotic mediation occurs to grasp the environment. This

mediation process, which is an innate ability of meaning making, is expressive of human nature.

The perception of others, art and nature --as one can see in passages of this subsection-- is an organismic and holistic experience, which is to say that it is physiognomic in the Wernerian sense. Starting there, it is possible to think about the possibility of a knowledge of nature that is not intellectual, not cognitive, pre-verbal, or non-propositional, but instead a form of direct, organismic, and physiognomic emotional knowledge that reveals a lively inner nature, itself being a living entity. Objects and the environment are perceived physiognomically. That is, there is a form of tacit knowledge in the sense of Polanyi (2009). Our body and animated nature are then an instrument for knowledge of nature and culture.

According to Werner (1955), this expressive-physiognomic dimension of experience would have four features: the omnipresent dynamics; undifferentiation in the components of the perceptual object; organismic involvement; and atmospheric context. The omnipresent dynamics has to do with the actual experience --“in live”-- of the perceived object. An illustrative example is proposed by Rojas (in this volume) when he refers to the fact that we generally say “I’m listening to” while we listen to a piece of music. The undifferentiation of components of the perceptual object corresponds, for example, to the tendency to equate objects with the people to which they belong. In this case, the objects can be harsh, threatening, depressing, etc. The organismic involvement implies a cognitive-affective perception of an object rather than a purely sensorial perception. Finally, the physiognomic experience is rooted in an atmospheric context of feeling and action. This feature is what allows us to connect physically distinct objects that share the same atmosphere.

These characteristics of the animated nature of the human being are present in the *affectivation* process. We make sense in the face of the uncertainty and ambiguity of nature and the uncertain future, which is an expression of animated innerness, as expressed by Rojas (this volume). The meaning making process in the encounter with the environment is a manifestation of the expressive nature of human beings, and through this dimension we experience the aesthetic experience that involves interacting with art and nature.



## Some final words

The chapters presented in this subsection allow us to reflect and generate new questions about how humans relate to their environment, and thus how we understand ourselves, others, and psychological development in the interaction with environment and culture. The affectivation process is a contribution of cultural psychology that involves an emotional experience on one end, and on the other, an activation of the environment, combining both phenomena in the same word.

The main contribution of cultural psychology to the understanding of the psychological and affective-cognitive phenomena is the study of experience as a permanent occurrence, an experience permanently in progress toward an uncertain future. Due to this, the meaning making process allows for the reduction of ambiguity and uncertainty of contact with the world, where our emotions, cognitions, and behaviors are mediated and regulated. Human development, then, is an ongoing process in which we affect and are affected by the environment in which the expressive dimension of our nature is manifested.

The chapters reviewed here emphasize the need for an approach that emphasizes the ideographic quality of psychological phenomena. Cultural psychology is a form of approach to the study of complex phenomena related to the meaning making process in human being - culture interaction and affectivation. Undoubtedly, cultural psychology is a contribution in this direction, but much remains to be discovered.

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