Dialogicality as a Basis for Development

MARIA ELISA MOLINA[1], Universidad del Desarrollo, Chile

The present article addresses the critique of Boulanger to the ecological model of Bronfrenbrenner applied to the implementation of educational and social strategies with school-family relationships in the context of cultural differences. The theoretical Model is review from a perspective of Cultural Psychology focussing of the weak aspects of its formulation and the need to further elaborations in the context of new contributions from dialogical perspectives and 4th cybernetic. The main critique of a mechanistic and normative understanding of social processes is discussed addressing the concepts of participation, intervention and observation from an irreversible temporality and a dialogical epistemology. The theoretical approach of cultural psychology looks at these processes as being part of an inclusive relation of co-transformation rather from a compensatory logic. Additionally a systemic approach appears to be appropriate to use for the analysis related with processes, contexts and contents. The model cannot explain the development-promoting tension and the systemic relation between different levels of the ecosystem and leaves unanswered the question about cultural diversity or differentiation. In the face of the question about the dialogue of the different levels of the ecosystem, the conceptual framework proposed addresses the encounter between different cultures pointing to novelty, the agency and the participation of all the instances involved in diversity and the permanent transformation of standards.

The paper of Boulanger (2019*a*, this Special Issue) revising the Bronfenbrenner's ecological model discusses with depth arguments how the ecological and contextual claims of the model become fragile when a mechanistic orientation is taken. The author describes how the principles of the ecological model are mainly applied and interpreted in a mechanistic way to the understanding and discussion of social situations. In this paper the case analysed are children and families belonging to poor social strata and their interaction with the dominant culture in the context of education of children –both formal and informal. What seems central to the proposal of Boulanger (2019*a*) is human participation in the relation with the environment as constitutive of reality, which is lost from the perspective of the conceptual application of Bronfenbrenner's proposal. I consider relevant the revision of the ecosystemic conceptualization in which macrosystem appears as a static structure with uniform components. This only idea seems do not fit with an ecosystemic principle. Probably the concept of *bioecology* has experimented transformations that its own model did not. I pretend to address the critic of the author pointing at his idea of *participation* from a dialogical perspective as an epistemology that needs to be included in an ecological view.

---

[1] The author can be reached at memolina@udd.cl

THE MECHANISTIC VERSION OF ORGANICISM

The main argument made by Boulanger ($2019a$) refers to the "*mechanistic* view of the world where the environment *externally* dictates *what* –Bronfenbrenner's reference to content—the person should adapts himself or herself to" (Boulanger, $2019a$). Boulanger ($2019a$) elaborates on the theoretical conceptualizations that are bases of the Bronfenbrenner's model going from the contextualist orientation, to organicism, formism and mecaniscism, demonstrating a weakening of the context in the model towards the overemphasis of the other frames. Taking the contextualist perspective would imply a reference to a reciprocal relationship from the person to the context and vice versa. It occurs in a bidirectionality from micro to macro and macro to micro, where transformation and transition processes become a primordial part in a dialectical sequence of these exchanges.

The Bronfenbrenner's approach appears to support the elaboration of contents about the situations analysed (over context and processes) associated with health, pathology, and diagnoses of roles, activities and relationships. When it resorts to formism it emphasizes the substance and content of the systems, treating activity and human development out of the time. Temporality together with space is the frame for contextualization and, on the other hand, the dimension of transformation and emergence, hence development (Marsico, 2015; Tateo, 2015).

The organicist frame is based on integration of the process but not its temporal quality of duration. The emphasis placed by the Bronfrenbrenner on the content is seen in the relationship between the ecosystemic levels where the contents of one level (i.e. of the mesosystem) can be moved to another level (i.e. microsystem) just as a translation of any matter, where the environment "as it is" is integrated at any level. No dialogue, no reciprocity, no change in environment. Likewise, the consideration of supportiveness vs harmfulness is conditioned to the coherence between different levels. Questions emerge in relation with development. Such as how transformations are displayed, transitions behave and boundaries function (Marsico, Cabell, Valsiner & Kharlamov, 2013). The emerging nature of human life is not addressed at every level from micro to macro and vice versa.

THE INTERVENER AS EXPERT

The situation around which Boulanger ($2019a$) discusses the application of the ecological model addresses compensatory intervention in school-family relationship. The notion of intervention offers a first matter for the discussion. Focusing on the concept of intervener, we can delve into the notion of participation particularly the status of participant of the different actors: teachers, parents, children and hence researcher. The concept of *compensatory intervention*, emerged from the analysis of Bronfenbrenner's model and how it is applied, is grounded in an asymmetric logic,

being the intervener an expert that displays strategies to impact a passive receiver, the child.

Even though Bronfenbrenner's model doesn't adhere to Systemic Theory, still the epistemological perspective of the observer-intervener coming from the second cybernetic tradition appears to be appropriately related to the ecosystemic principle, particularly in view of the critic presented by Boulanger (2019a). From this view the observer included in the object observed becomes part of its own observation, which impinges at the same time on the output. The expert in Bronfenbrenner's model as a basis for compensatory intervention, is an observer not included in the system that attempts to construct knowledge about the reality "in itself" disregarding his or her way of enquiring, thinking or feeling and the relation of those processes with his or her conclusions.

The thesis of Boulanger (2019a) more over seems to agree with Dialogical Self Theory (Boulanger & Valsiner, 2017 ; Hermans, 1999; Marková, 1987; Valsiner 2007), which considers the communicative and constructive interaction between different actors, i.e. educative agents, parents, children and community participants in the relation family-school to respond to the needs of education considering every agent within the system, as participant and object of observation, being part of an inclusive relation of co-creation (Marková, 2003).

When a *compensatory logic* is taken to propose an intervention from the teachers towards the parents or the children, there is a desirable developmental model that implies assuming a strange perspective for understanding their needs and for intervention. The children and the family are the systems observed and evaluated but passive receivers of the intervention, thus not participants of it. The professional in the process of intervention when playing an asymmetric and the distanced role will probably frustrate the main objective that of addressing the needs for development of the target. The strange perspective adopted will affect the possibilities of the family and children for connecting with their own context. From here, the frame of the ecological theory applied to a compensatory logic seems to decontextualize the children's and their parents' positions, their resources and views by reason of the educative actions.

When any intervention is applied it receives from the client – children and/or families – a reciprocal response, in relation to how they perceive that they are treated, welcomed, respected and considered empathically (proximal). On their part, they could act obediently or passive when they perceive an authoritarian style, which doesn't inform about the benefit of the intervention. The compensatory perspective rigidly distances the expert-observer and his/her understanding of the environment out there 'as it should be', which implies reasoning using a linear and normative logic. From this logic the intervener-observer agent will exclude his/her affects, empathy abilities or dispositions of connecting with the child their family and their context.

ECOLOGICAL AND SYSTEMIC ARTICULATION

The argument of Boulanger (2019a) addresses the ecological model applied to the context of parental engagement in school-family-partnership. At this aim the conceptualization of the macro system is a central aspect of the model. This conceptual scheme will have relevant effects on the way in which the intervention and its results will be analysed. Boulanger (2019a) highlights the Macrosystem notion proposed by Bronfenbrenner as "blueprint" referring to "… an organizing principle that shape social interactions (and the relation between cultures) which occurs within and at the centre of systems in the ecosystem" (Boulanger, 2019a). This principle, which is related to the coherence rule that defines the conditions of interaction of integrated systems, points to normative standards that establish the way in which interactions between systems or within them should occur.

The notion of normative properties of the environment to which the person adapts and the configuration at the space/temporal field that distinguishes Boulanger (2019a), raises questions about the process of dialogue between the Micro, Meso, Exo and Macro systems. Considering that at the macro level relevant notions unfold in the social environment, which through social representations establish regulatory frameworks for human behaviour and social coexistence at the meso and micro levels. It is understood that at the micro level there is a dialogue and negotiation in the present moment. The micro process is an immediate phenomenon. The daily experience of meaning construction at microsystems displays unique contextualized and locally placed interactions (Valsiner, 2007). In addition, the relationship between personal (micro) and shared (meso - exo - macro) notions generates a micro - macro dialogue in a different space/temporal field. That is to say, the evolution of meanings in the social context would unfold in a different and not immediate temporality in relation to the personal experiences located at the here-now (micro) level. This process leads to differentiation, and accounts for the diversity and complexity of the interactions between different levels in the ecosystem.

Despite Bronfrenbrenner points out that there would be a contextual conveyance and negotiation process between the person and the macrosystem, its logic of coherence, the uniform components of the ecosystem and the static conception of culture do not seem to examine the complexity involved in this dialogue of systems at different levels. By recognizing the negotiation process Bronfrenbrenner assumes some variability between the different systemic levels (micro, meso, exo, macro). Nevertheless, the logic of coherence does not explain the diversity within the system and appears rather as a normative effort from the intentionality of the author. Boulanger (2019a) wonders what happens when two systems interact and differ or have contradictions. How to explain that there is tension between the different levels of the ecosystem but not between the parts of the same level or system? As Boulanger (2019a) questions, this approach offers no alternative to cultural diversity or differentiation.

SYSTEMIC PATTERNS AND THE REVELANCE OF THE PROCESS

In systemic approach the notion of pattern receives considerable attention from the authors of the model. It referees to the configuration and organization of system interactions, and in this sense it highlights the form aspect of interactions. From this perspective the form aspect (the pattern) is addressed for understanding and describing the processes in which the part of the systems become engaged, hence going beyond content. A contribution of Bateson (Bateson, 1991; Keeney, 1987) addressed the notion of pattern to study the process of differentiation and development of systems. Considering the difference between two pieces of information (or two patterns), new information of higher complexity emerges, which also includes the previous. It is the case of binocular vision in which the bias of the visions of each eye and their differences allow the perception of depth. From systemic perspective distinction and difference emerge as elements of development and genetic impulse, conceiving movement basically as a difference in the context of time/space. From this proposal, the patterns are also being modified in recursive processes and expanding possibilities towards superior recursion orders. Patterns are compared not only for establishing similarities but moreover to construct new possibilities at the zone of difference. The systemic approach when it arose made an important contribution as putting the accent in the process instead of the contents of human behaviour and from there, the relationships prior to the individuals (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Hoffman, 1987), probably being currently overcame by the developments of the constructionist and the dialogical theories.

DIALOGICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

The epistemological debate developed around the ecosystemic theorization has taken different topics from the objectivity/non-objectivity controversy, the opened vs closed systems (Maturana & Varela, 1984; Wiener, 1975; von Foester, 1991), the universal reality vs locally constructed (Foucault, 2002; Gergen, 1996) and the dialogical epistemology that recognizes social systems constructed in communication (Bakhtin/Voloshinov, 1992). The last perspective is attributed to the forth cybernetics (Boulanger, 2015).

Closeness/distance movement incorporates the dialogical perspective and the notion of participation that Boulanger (2019*a*) points out. From a social and dialogical epistemology proximity as well as distance are non-exclusive (either/or) but inclusive (both/and) (Valsiner, 2007). This dialogical perspective offers bases for elaborating on the processes that participate at the boundaries of micro, meso, exo and macro system. Psychological distance entails a dialogical epistemology when it moves fluidly with proximity – its counter-meaning – in the relation with others. It enables meaning regulation and the flexibility of subjective positions in dialogue (Simão, Molina & Del Rio, 2011). Dialogicality enables distance and proximity positions to be in constant movement. Proximity comes with sympathy, feeling with the other, communication, reciprocity and connection. On the other hand, distance is a position for filter and processing new meanings and incoming messages, incorporating senses and meanings in the personal scope through constant internalization/externalization process

(Valsiner, 2014). Distance is the process that allows making distinctions, differentiating the parts of a system and categorizing to make sense of experiences in an inclusive way (Boulanger, 2019*b*; Simão, Molina, Del Río, 2011; Valsiner, 2007).

Dialogue between distance and proximity enables intersubjective sharing as it allows the self to distance from the other and then approach it in newness. It is sympathy that comes with proximity, which is needed to articulate with distance and hence constructing empathy.

The dual dynamic of proximity/distance - both qualities of spatial regulation and their mutual organization offer a different interpretation for the role of intervener from an epistemological perspective. Being part of an inclusive opposite, the process of knowledge construction incorporates psychological distance – in terms of making distinctions – and proximity – connecting with the others – as complementary dynamics of the observer included in the system observed, belonging to the forth cybernetics.

Distance/proximity process does not unfold like an alternating dynamic necessarily. There are different forms of coordination that entail ambivalence and uncertainty (see figure 1). These are interdependent and contingent options that differently could form the harmful or supportive alternatives, which will depend on the meaning attributed to the level of proximity or distance felt. The relational dynamics display movements that give form to different patterns, creating different ways of interaction and transitions from one to another. Meanings, social representations, norms or constraints are displayed in dialogues and push to transitions. Each person may feel the other – i.e. the intervener - being too much there – intrusive or too far - detached. The meaning construction around the notions of distance and proximity relates with notions of relatedness, bonds, belonging, the own environment, the personal space, intimacy, inner life/outer life, being uncovered, self-boundaries, or autonomy, being alone or abandoned.
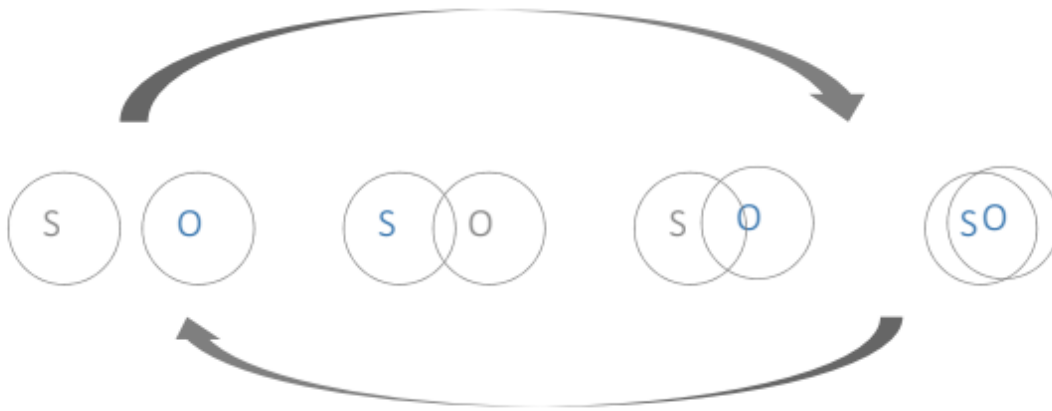
Figure 1. Dynamics of distance-proximity. S: Subject, O: Other.

The intervener-participant fluidly interacts in this dynamic becoming a mediator of the mesosystem for the child (microsystem) and binding macro/microsystem in an uncertain and indeterminate process (see Figure 2). On the other side, the family and the child become the mesosystem for the intervener (his microsystem). The intervener acts in a contingency logic in which intervener and addressee share the space in an implicative, conditioned and unpredictable relation (Lebra, 2004). The intervener could be perceived not enough outside – for example, not respectful of the identity issues, private aspects or intimate domain - or vice versa - not near enough, not enough accessible, quotidian. So there is a dynamic of tension that motivates flexibility and movements to generate new ways of organizing life. Some of these concepts invite new understanding of the integration that families, children, teachers and school organization need to going on with develop.
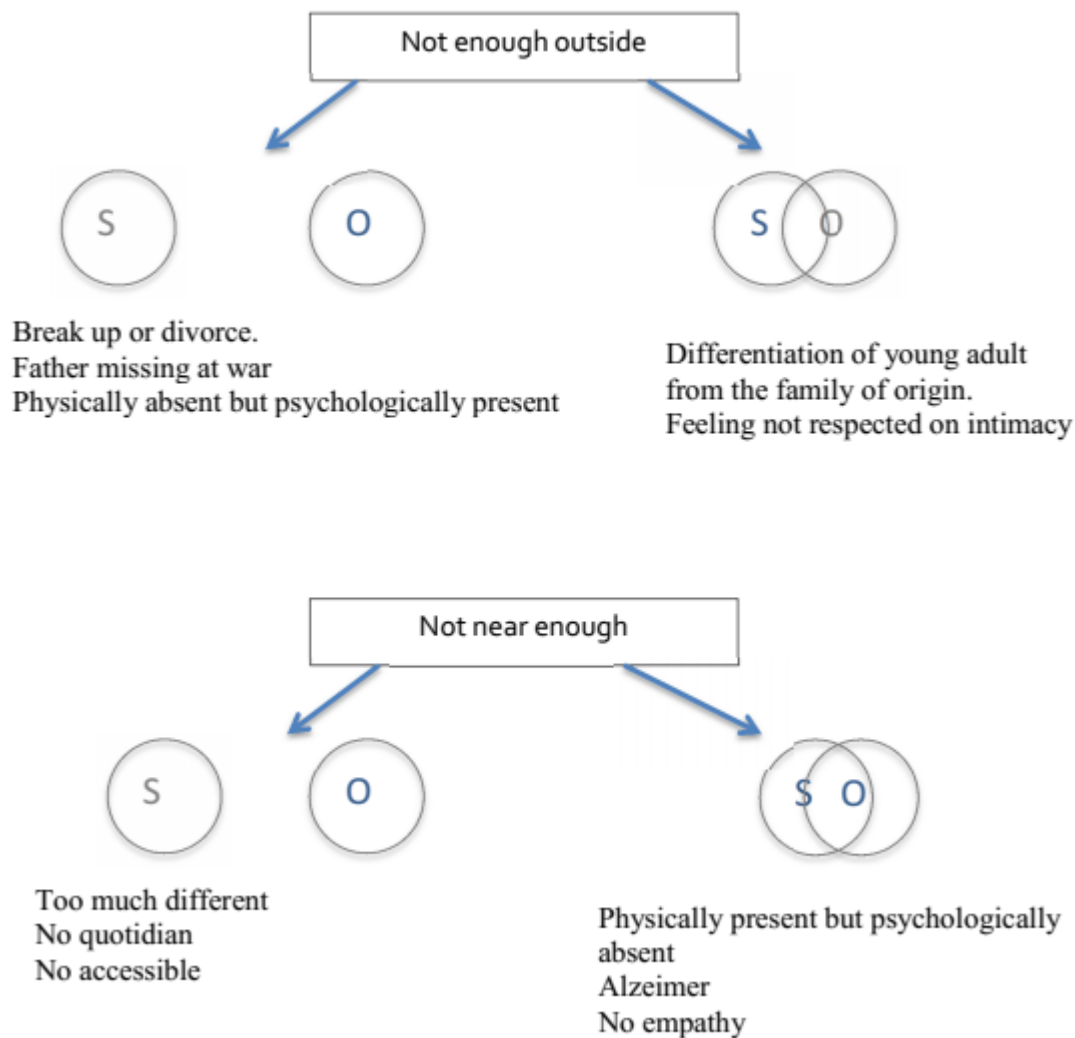
Figure 2. Ambivalence in dynamic of distance-proximity. S: Subject, O: Other. (Khaw & Hardesty, 2015).

Taking a perspective of inclusive opposites is a main aspect of dialogicality. The imbalance and asymmetry generates tension and directionality towards the possible and unknown future (Marková, 2003). The differences emerged come from different subjectivities that comprehend meanings but also from pre-verbal aspects such as affects and intentionality. From Marková's conceptualization the systemic homeostasis may appear as a quest for relief of the dialogical tension rather than a quality or property of the systems. Marsico and Tateo (2017) deeper elaborate the conceptualization of tension as a developmental dynamic in terms of a tensegrity system, not as a search for homeostasis as systemic model proposes. Actually, the unstable equilibrium becomes the quality going beyond homeostasis and patterns. It is proposed as an organizing principle "based on a state of constant dynamic pre-tension that ensures both flexibility and stability over time" (op. cit. p. 538). From this approach

the concept of tensegrity (Marsico & Tateo, 2017) offers a dialogical understanding of inclusive opposite systems that integrate a more diverse thinking.

CONCLUSION

The discussion raised by Boulanger ($2019a$) regarding the theoretical contradictions of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model and its pertinence on the implementation of strategies for approaching educational and social programs is at the core of thinking progression in culture. The debate leads to the transformations that the ecological and systemic models had encourage when new perspectives were proposed from their views. From there relational phenomena, cultural and historic processes have been increasingly assumed in the psychological debate. With them, new understandings had emerged associated with an irreversible temporality and a dialogical epistemology.

With this debate, Boulanger ($2019a$) offers a field that goes beyond the epistemological question for truth or subjectivity/ objectivity, opening a conceptual framework that allow dealing with the understanding of phenomena at different micro and macro levels. By taking this perspective, what emerges is movement and inclusive dialogism. The meanings and senses that are put into interaction - at stake - behave as inclusive opposites that nourish transitions and promote development, which progresses carried by the dynamics of tensegrity. So in the face of the question of how the different levels of the ecosystem dialogue, these conceptual frameworks address the encounter between different cultures -for example a dominant and a minority one- pointing to the novelty of the process, the agency and the participation of all the instances involved in diversity and the permanent transformation of standards.

After reading Boulanger's ($2019a$) analysis one wonders just like him, why professionals appropriate Bronfrenbrenner's model. There arises the answer about common sense, which is characterized mainly by atomistic views such as of an individual mind, with a normative emphasis on the contents over process. This view is consistent with a conception of human difficulties as "disorders" with no room for diversity, uncertainty and emergence. These same professionals and those who investigate in human science are responsible for bringing knowledge to new frontiers. Analysis like the one that Boulanger ($2019a$) carries out motivates the professionals of the human and social sciences to expand horizons.

Behind the Bronfenbrener's model proposal and the debate that Boulanger ($2019a$) has opened are ethical conceptions about the upbringing, education, social promotion and well-being. At each level of the ecosystem culture is developed, where ethics resides as a process in constant transformation. From this point of view, when considering an applied field of psychology, such as that of community social intervention, there is an option for concepts of health, care and social welfare, where the ethics adopted does not seem to involve ambiguities and tensions. When the analysis assumes a position from the ethics and values, it is from within the culture –too much there– without taking enough distance to consider what appears a questioning model concerning certainty

and truth. Certainly theoretical development constitutes the advantage point for distance in advance conceptual application to concrete actions.

References

Anderson, H. 8c Goolishian, H. (1988). Human systems as linguistic systems. *Family Process*, 27, 371-393.

Bakhtin, M./ Voloshinov, V.N. (1992). *El marxismo y la filosofía del lenguaje*. Madrid: Alianza.

Bateson, G. (1991). Pasos hacia una ecología de la mente. Buenos Aires, Ed. Planeta.

Boulanger, D. (2019*a*). Bronfenbrenner's model as a basis for compensatory intervention in school-family relationship: Exploring metatheoretical foundations. *Psychology & Society*, 11 *(1).*

Boulanger, D. (2019*b*). Social Representations of Parental Engagement in Poverty-related Contexts: Empty Parents and Full Teachers. *Psychology & Society,* 11 *(1).*

Boulanger, D. (2015) Mise en perspective de la théorie des représentations sociales originale dans le contexte de l'engagement parental déployé au cœur du programme *Famille, école, communauté, réussir, ensemble.* Thèse présentée à la Faculté d'éducation en vue de l'obtention du grade de Docteur en éducation. Université de Sherbrooke.

Boulanger, D. & Valsiner, J. (2017). How can the social representations theory be made dialogical? *International Journal for Dialogical Science 10*(2), 1-8

Foucault, M. (2002). *Hermenéutica del sujeto.* F. Gros, ed. México: FCE.

Gergen, K. (1996). *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Mass.

Hermans, H. (1999). Dialogical thinking and self innovation. *Culture & Psychology. 5*(1), 67–87

Hermans, H. Konopka, A., Oosterwegel, A. & Zomer, P. (2017). Fields of tension in a boundary-crossing world: Towards a democratic organization of the self. *Integration Psychology Behavior 51*, 505–535

Hoffman, L. (1987). *Fundamentos de la terapia familiar: Un marco conceptual para el cambio de sistemas*. Traducción Juan José Utrilla.Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Khaw, L. & Hardesty J. (2015). Perceptions of boundary ambiguity in the process of leaving an abusive partner. *Family Process 54*, 327–343

Keeney, B. (1987). *Estética del cambio*. Buenos Aires: Paidos.

Lebra, T. (2004). *The Japanese self in cultural logic*. Honolulu: University of Hawaiʻi Press

Marková I. (1987). On the interaction of opposites in psychological processes. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 17*, 279–299.

Marková, I., (2003). *Dialogicality and Social Representations. The dynamics of mind* Cambridge: University Press.

Marsico, G. (2015). Developing with time: Defining a temporal mereotopology In. L. Simão, D. Guimarães and J. Valsiner Eds. *Temporality: Culture in the flow of human experience*. Charlotte : Information Age Publishing.

Marsico, G., & Tateo, L. (2017). Borders, Tensegrity and Development in Dialogue. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioural Sciences, 51*(4), 536-556.

Marsico, G, Cabell, K., Valsiner J. & Kharlamov, N. (2013). Interobjectivity as a border: The fluid dynamics of betweenness. In G. Sammut, P. Daanen and F. Moghaddam (Eds.) *Understanding the self and others: Explorations in intersubjectivity and interobjectivity.* London New York: Routledge

Maturana, H., & Varela, F. (1984). *El árbol del conocimiento: Las bases biológicas del entendimiento humano.* Buenos Aires: Lumen.

Simão, L., Molina M. E., & Del Río, M.T. (2011). Aproximação, distanciamento e negociação de sentido em relações eu-outro no diálogo psicoterapéutico In M. I. da Silva e P. de Salles (Eds.). *Proximidade e Distanciamento*. Sao Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo.

Tateo, L. (2015). Temporality and generalization in psychology: Time as context. In. L. Simão, D. Guimarães and J. Valsiner Eds. *Temporality: Culture in the flow of human experience*. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing.

Valsiner, J. (2007). Culture in minds and societies: Foundation of cultural psychology. New Delhi: Sage

Valsiner, J. (2014). An invitation to cultural psychology Ch.4 Mutuality of Internalization and Externalization. London: Sage.

Von Foester, H. (1991). *Las semillas de la cibernética*. Barcelona: Gedisa.

Wiener, N. (1975). *Cybernetics: Or the control of communication in the animal and the machine* (2a ed.) Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.