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Amerindian anthropology and cultural psychology: Crossing boundaries and meeting otherness’ worlds

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Abstract
Addressing integrative possibilities between psychology and anthropology, this paper aims to design conceptual linkages between semiotic-cultural constructivist psychology and the anthropological theory of Amerindian perspectivism. From the psychological view, it is the interdependence between the structural and processual dimensions of the personal culture that makes parallels with Amerindian perspectivism fruitful. This anthropological frame proposes an experiment with native conceptions, which I argue similar to what Baldwin (1906) called sembling. Hence, it can be considered an active imitation of otherness’ viewpoint in order to approach indigenous worlds. It is supposed that this procedure leads to the emergence of new symbolic elements configuring the cultural action field of each agency in interaction. It is proposed that “making-believe” the Amerindian is convergent with the dialogic-hermeneutic approach of semiotic-cultural constructivism. As a result of the present integrative effort, is designed a meta-model that multiplies the genetic process of concrete symbolic objects.

Keywords
Amerindian perspectivism, dialogism, otherness, semiotic-cultural constructivism, symbolic resources

The present work addresses an interdisciplinary dialogue between semiotic-cultural constructivist psychology and the theory of Amerindian perspectivism, a contemporary approach in the field of Americanist anthropology.

Semiotic-cultural constructivism, on one hand, “focuses especially on the process of individual development, in which I–other interactions unfolding from, as
well as forming, the cultural space have a prime role” (Simão, 2003). In this process, the interlocutors’ quest for mutual understanding and sharing of their experiential meanings brings about a movement of decentration, from which some novelties can emerge in their comprehension. Comprehension is here understood in its two intertwined aspects: comprehension of the subject of the ongoing conversation, as well as of the relative position of each interlocutor in the conversation.

Amerindian perspectivism, on the other hand, is a label given to a contemporary anthropological approach that has emerged in the core of a challenge faced by the americanist ethnography, that is, the failure in comprehension brought forth by cross-cultural comparisons among tribal groups in America, Africa, Asia, and Oceania (cf. Overing Kaplan, 1977). Aiming to understand the American ethnic groups in their distinctive particularities, Amerindian perspectivism proposes to carry out an experiment with natives’ conceptions (cf. Viveiros de Castro, 2002). It is proposed to the researcher thinking “as if” he or she was someone belonging to the studied group, implying not just taking into account the native as subject, but thinking what a subject can be according to natives’ points of view. As a consequence, a set of interrelated autochthonous ideas and practices relating to Amerindians’ world views could be made intelligible.

Bringing anthropology to the core of theoretical and methodological debate in cultural psychology is pertinent since the latter conceives that human development occurs in an interwoven semiotic-cultural fabric, which constitutes an action field from the interaction between people and their environment. This emic-phenomenological approach concerns the immanent cultural experience (cf. Simão, 2008) in which distinct conceptions of subjectivity and objectivity can be confronted, leading to the emergence of novelties.

The meanings of culture open possible ways for an interdisciplinary integrative synthesis around the notion of perspective, involving anthropological and psychological theoretical frames. Integration of cultural and psychological discourses has had a place in the history of psychology since the end of the 19th century (e.g., Wundt, Steinthal, & Lazarus’ version of Völkerpsychologie), and with the debate on the cultural nature of personality during the 20th century (cf. Valsiner, 2004). Valsiner argues that the first two efforts failed to produce a new synthetic science. Nevertheless, an experiment is currently being attempted in order to further an interdisciplinary synthesis, looking particularly for approximations with anthropology and ethnology. Efforts are being made to avoid past failures, now focusing, among other aspects, on the boundaries between individuals and society and novelties emergence in the so-called cultural field (cf. Boesch, 1991, 1997, 2001; Valsiner, 1999, 2001b, 2007a). Some of these ideas will be developed here.

Approaching an Amerindian cosmology: The case of savage pigs

In 1996 the anthropologist Tânia Stolze Lima published a paper where she proposed the theory of perspectivism in order to understand Amerindian cosmologies
and practices. Her paper presents theoretical unfoldings on indigenous thinking from exhaustive ethnomethodological field experiences with Juruna people between the years of 1984 and 1990. Her propositions, in association with a paper of Viveiros de Castro on the same issue, are considered pioneering in the field of the anthropological theory of Amerindian perspectivism. Lima (1996) proposed that according to Juruna people, “animals consider themselves as humans” (p. 26). The following excerpt of a Juruna myth gives a concrete notion of what is implicated in this kind of affirmation:

There was a shaman who received in the settlement, during the vigil, the visitation of a shaman-pig, with whom he smokes, drinks cauim and dances. The visitor arrived in the company of all his folks, and, of course, just the shaman could see them. When someone asked him to bring pigs [the hunter asking the Juruna’s shaman], he used to invite the shaman-pig to drink cauim and arrange the hunting. After entering in trance, the hunter had to ask again: “Bring pigs for me! Tame them for me!” “That is OK!,” agreed the shaman. In these moments, respect or deference using language were conditions for pig’s reclaim. But, while all wise hunters affirmed, “My prey will be tamed!,” a man nicknamed Kingfisher-head lost his mind and said: “My prey will pull my pending testicle.” The others advised him about the necessity of taking care, because it is not a good idea to play with language at a moment like that. Next day, they recommended Kingfisher-head to stay at home in order to avoid the pigs seeing him. He was cheeky and didn’t follow the recommendations. At the end of hunting, his colleagues found him almost dead, with wrested testicles and body pierced by the furious pig’s tooth. He almost could not tell how he was attacked. His soul departed with the survived pigs in the direction of the “Amazonas” river. Many groups of pigs allied with them along the trip and Kingfisher-head looked very agreeable to his new companions, entertaining them all the time. The shaman saw them during a dream and, according to the ancient people, he narrated:

They went laughing.
Pigs are like humans,
They asked him:
“Say the name of things for us!”
“What is it?”
“It is it.”
They founded the vagina-honey.
“Which is this honey?”
“It is vagina-honey.”
They founded the swallow-honey.
“Which is this honey?”
“That is the penis-honey.”
And the pigs laughed,
“So, is it honeyed?”
“Penis is honeyed!”
And the pigs laughed, “ha ha ha.”
And he departed with the pigs laughing
They asked him the name of animals, of honeys...
He answered,
They laughed,
“So, is it honeyed?”
Therefore, when a shaman is dreaming with pigs,
Or when he is inebriate,

What is a myth? From Amerindian understandings to cultural psychology

According to Lévi-Strauss and Eribon (1990), if we asked an Amerindian what is a myth, the answer probably would be that it is “[A] story of a moment when humans and animals were not distinguished yet” (p. 178, cf. also Viveiros de Castro, 2006). Nevertheless, the mythological narrative does not concern the searching for historical correspondences in terms of chronological description of events. For instance, shamans’ experiences, as dreams and inebriation, allow them to access the original kind of experience characterized by the undistinguished nature of animals and humans. This means that concomitant with the apparent discontinuity of animals and humans, the mythical flow conceives a possibility of non-differentiation among types of beings. Hence, a myth is a narrative that talks about a moment that is neither past nor future, but expresses a relational configuration among beings in the cosmos. Amerindian mythology proposes a way for understanding the formation of meaningful structured social realities, which presents an intelligible distinction and classes of existential elements from the perspective of a group.

Myths are constantly reaffirmed in social meetings of each community. They are told from generation to generation, leading to the production of inevitable variations. Lévi-Strauss (1971) pointed out that each expression of a specific myth is always a variation of a previous structure, implying that each community develops itself in contact with a set of myth-stories, historically produced, forbidden or transformed along successive variations. The differential mythological set allows the perception of cultural distinction among peoples, their beliefs, and their ways of acting; however, it cannot be totally clear in many cases.

The symbolic action theory of the cultural psychologist Ernst Boesch approaches and distances itself from the structural conception of myth as presented by Lévi-Strauss. They are close, because for both myth expresses cultural ways of dwelling in the environment; however, they diverge in the sense that Boesch focuses on personal and selective internalization of myths as the cornerstone of their transformation. For Boesch (1991, Lonner & Hayes, 2007), myths have a personal
importance constraining possibilities of meaningful understanding of experiences. They articulate existential themes, giving sense for human life without the necessity of rational proof to be accepted. On the contrary, the epistemic subjectivity structures the meanings of what is experienced in relation to the pool of symbolic resources offered by the myths. In this sense, different cultures channel the manners of subjective formation, addressing different existential perspectives (cf. Valsiner, 1998, 2001a; Simão, 2005).

Semiotic-cultural constructivist psychology focuses on the processual dynamic of personal selection. Selective internalization is subjectively organized as an open-ended system that Boesch (1991, 1997, 2001) named fantasms. Personal fantasms, as an epistemic-meaningful internalization of myths, allows the subject to create conscious or unconscious projects and to anticipate the future in face of specific environmental configurations. This constrains someone’s action potential, closing some paths and enabling others, in order to achieve personal aims. From this approach, the hunting of savage pigs presented above entails a setting of ritualized actions in the Juruna cultural field, aiming to avoid the souls of the hunters being led towards the same destiny as Kingfisher-head, that is, to avoid their capture by the pigs. The cross-evaluation of the virtual possibilities of acting (project) and the results of a specific action allows the subject to reconfigure its own action potential, leading to changes in the personal fantasms and selection and modification of different aspects from the current myth.

**Cross-cultural criticism**

The cultural psychologies of both Boesch and Valsiner criticize aspects of cross-cultural research. Valsiner (2007a) pointed out that the cross-cultural presupposition of qualitative homogeneity and temporal stability does not fit with the processual nature of groups and persons. On the other hand, Boesch (2007) remarks on seven flaws of cross-cultural approach, six of them concerning theoretical and methodological presuppositions and the last one strongly ethical, concerning the fact that the psychological study of other peoples should not be carried out as if the subjects were simply a source of data for a supposedly well-intentioned investigation. Consequently, the interactive activity of the researcher deals with scientific and ethical questions that concern the outcomes of knowledge construction. As the psychological fields of investigation are entangled with I–other relations, the ethical dimension takes place as an exercise of managing different perspectives inherent to the space of human relationships. In spite of the fact that researchers are privileged constructors of psychological knowledge, they are always culturally situated, making use of cultural elements for knowledge production (Boesch, 2001, 2007; Simão, 1989; Valsiner, 1994, 1995, 2001a). Therefore, researcher and research objects (or subjects) are linked in such a way that it becomes impossible to assert a universal point of view. The search for a general knowledge construction, however, is a goal that demands the inclusion of researchers’ personal perspectives—their theoretical-methodological options,
beliefs, values, ethical concerns, etc.—as empirical evidence of the produced knowledge.

The question of the researcher positioning is especially relevant to interethnic and interdisciplinary studies concerning cultural psychology, specially if it assumes the absence of a consensual criteria which allows the construction of hierarchies and comparisons among different cultural mythologies and cosmologies. In this sense, Viveiros de Castro (2002) remarks that a counterpart of social anthropology is the conceptions that the subjects of study have about who the anthropologist is, the meanings they construct about the researchers. Conceptions and meanings that the natives construct about the anthropologist constrain their relations and, consequently, the process of data collection:

I’ve discovered that many of collected information in interviews, before I attend to the ritual, were contradicted by the performance (when everything started to fit). The same can be said about other field experiences. More than once I listened to the elders claim: “Why she wants to know this if she is not going to live here?” or “Why wants to know? Does not understand!” (Lagrou, 2007, p. 310).

Therefore it is impossible to escape from a point of view, since each subject is positioned in its own environment. Besides knowledge construction cannot be neutral if we disregard the idea of a transcendental being. As each being has a perspective on reality, its definition is the proper field of divergences that cannot find, necessarily, a common ground that allows objective equivalence. As a consequence, the relation with otherness, i.e., from different social fields or heterogeneous places within a social field leads to transformative and unpredictable outcomes for the participants of the relation.

**Transformative implications of a dialogue with otherness**

The way as autochthonous people from America construct knowledge about themselves, about otherness and about the environment has been an object of questioning since the beginning of colonization, when Europeans and Americans first met each other (16th century). When Europeans started to deal with Amerindians, they were not sure about the indigenous subjective condition. The main question for the Europeans was whether the indigenous people had—or did not have—a soul. From their side, Amerindians tried to verify the supernaturality of white people through a long-term observation of whether their bodies would decompose after death, as Lévi-Strauss described:

In the Greater Antilles, a few years after the discovery of America, while the Spaniards were sending out commissions of investigation to discover whether or not the natives had a soul, the latter spent their time drowning white prisoners in order to ascertain, by long observation, whether or not their bodies would decompose (Lévi-Strauss, 1952, p. 12).
Viveiros de Castro (2006) makes reference to this anecdote to show a different aspect than the one emphasized by Lévi-Strauss. For the Frenchman it evinces that the Indians are human beings, since they make the distinction between nature and culture and their cultures are ethnocentric as all human cultures. On the other hand, Viveiros de Castro asserts that Amerindians do not oppose nature and culture in the way that Europeans do. So, despite both people were ignorant about the other and both considered themselves “humans,” each group created different hypothesis from which they developed different procedures for knowledge construction about the other.

From the semiotic-cultural constructivist perspective, the anecdote can also express human potentialities for apprehending reality, either giving objectivity or subjectivity to elements perceived in the environment (Boesch, 1991). These potentialities are expressed in the excerpt which evinces that while the whites took the objectivity of otherness as given, questioning whether they possessed subjectivity or not, Amerindians took subjectivity as given (Viveiros de Castro, 2002), and were concerned about the characteristics of the body: corporeality was the distinct characteristic that could guarantee the humanity of otherness as similar to themselves.

The “objective correlative” (cf. Viveiros de Castro, 2004) for the notion of humanity was different for the two peoples at that moment: for the whites, to be human was to have a soul, for the Amerindians, to be human was to have an appropriated body.

Amerindian perspectivism remarks a general ethnographic evidence that according to native comprehensions the world is inhabited by many species of beings endowed with conscience and culture; the way that human beings see them is radically different from the way these beings see the humans and themselves (cf. Ingold, 2000; Lagrou, 2007; Lima, 1996, 2005; Pissolato, 2007; Stutzman, 2005; Vilaça, 2006; Viveiros de Castro, 1998, 2002, 2006, etc.). So the possibility of occupying a perspective can be conferred to beings that are from different species from a western point of view, that is, for them, “being human” is a quality related to the situation of things in the world as they are seen from a certain perspective. Some non-humans can actualize the potential of being humans in ways that make their humanity more evident than we—*homo sapiens*—could do. It means that some supposed non-humans can take the place of being a person in a better way than a common person could.

Lévi-Straussian analysis on the logic of sensible categories, developed in four volumes of the *Mythologiques* series (Lévi-Strauss, 1983, 2004a, 2004b, 2006), shows not just the central role of the bodies and material flows to the Amerindian understanding of their surroundings, but also the process of constant modulation and reconfiguration of the myths. Besides, changes in the Amerindian discourse continue to occur as a politic-cultural process of creative adaptation in order to produce a field of interethnic negotiation. In this process the active role of discursive selection and formulation takes place:

The cultural intertextuality of the contact is fed by the discursive ethnopolitics on the rhetoric shapes (negatives or positives) from which the white people construct “the
indigenous”. Nevertheless, it is not limited to the reciprocal images of indigenous and whites. The self-definition of each protagonist is fed not just of the representation that one constructs about the other but also of the representation that the other makes about the previous: the self-representation of the interethnic actors is constructed in the fabric of the image they had of the others and their own image mirrored on the other (Albert, 2002, p. 241).

The interchange of differences attributed to otherness and the identifications personally attributed leads to the emergence of a meta-level of evaluations concerning life problems emerging in the course of social relations and possible solutions.

Sharing the quest for sharing: Semiotic cultural-constructivism and the dialogical methodology

The issue of intersubjective sharing and differences are discussed in the framework of semiotic-cultural constructivism from an hermeneutic viewpoint (Simão, 2005). First, in I–other communication, the search for sharing experiential meanings demands an effort to adjust different perspectives in order to fit different positions in the dialogue (who is who in the dialogue) as well as different positions on the subject matter they are talking about (what, why, when, where we are talking about). Rommetveit (1992) proposed the notion of tuning to refer to this process. Second, each person entering into a dialogue will unavoidably enter into it with his/her presuppositions (cf. Taylor, 2002); the issue, then, is not to get rid of our own presuppositions, but to take into account that the other will have his/her own, which will probably enter into some disagreement with ours. Third, as a consequence of the second process, entering into a dialogue with the aim of conversation and argumentation, instead of exclusively persuading the other, requires being open to the other’s voice (perspectives) and letting them talk, even if this voice will be a counter-voice concerning our preconceptions (cf. Gadamer, 1985). Fourth, in this process, some preconceptions of each participant can be transformed, and some co-constructed conceptions about the subject can emerge; in brief, this is the process that Gadamer (1985) calls fusion of horizons.

Converging with the hermeneutic approach, the present articulation between psychology and anthropology adopted the dialogical methodology of research, consisting, precisely, in taking into consideration that the subject and object of research come to exist together (cf. Marková, 1997, 2006) as the relation between figure and ground, in such a way that a tensional boundary is composed between both (Herbst, 1995; Simão, 2004). This leads to a transformation of the object of investigation, through semiotic-symbolic mediation, as a way of reducing the tension that emerges through the relation.

In the present case, dialogic methodology was used to understand all designated levels of analysis and its consequences to the production or modification of symbolic resources around the selected frameworks. The notion of symbolic
resource (SR) was defined by Zittoun, Duveen, Gillespie, Invision, & Psaltis (2003) as the symbolic element used by an agent “in order to achieve something in a particular social, cultural and temporal context […] it enables the agent to make a transition from one socio-cultural formation to another” (p. 416, cf. also Zittoun, 2006). In order to facilitate the presentation of the web of oppositions designed for this research I constructed a schematic graphic, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 illustrates the levels of analysis that was designed for the present interdisciplinary research and which symbolic resources are the focus of transformation in each moment of relevant interaction. It is structured with two axes that include the researcher, as a human being existentially positioned—that is, as an I with its intrasubjective and intersubjective relations and its symbolic elements, which can be used as symbolic resources in order to fill gaps emerging from divergences in these axes. The intersubjective line is oriented to the reign of perception, in which the researcher deals with the impact of the contact with the authors of the selected theories of analysis. This refers to what Boesch (1991) calls “is value”, that is, the objective construction of others/the world as separated from the I. Crossing this is the intrasubjective line, oriented to the reign of imagination, that is, as Sartre (1996) pointed out, “an act of the conscience in order to make the thought object, the desired thing, appear in such a way that we can apprehend it” (p. 165). Imagination and perception are usually divergent, and sometimes the imaginative level can be configured by a subject as a “should value” in terms of Boesch. This means that through human action upon the world, someone can transform it or transform its personal expectancies. In both cases he or she can reach some symbolic convergence, reducing tensional gaps between the lines.

The same contrast depicted in the graphic is remarked upon in Valsiner’s (2007b) proposition on the subjectively lived duality “as-IS” and “as-IF,” which address human actions to a desired future. Using these notions to understand the activity of research, Figure 1 shows that acting in the world, the researcher can produce a project (SR 1) in order to develop, for instance, a thesis (could be a paper or communications in scientific conferences and seminars—SR 2), which puts into relation objects of questioning. The relation between theoretical constructions on the field of semiotic cultural-constructivism (SR 3) and theoretical constructions on the field of Amerindian perspectivism (SR 5) is possible thanks to the role the relations between psychology and anthropology have in the background of human sciences, history, and philosophy (SR 4), as I already have remarked in the introduction. These relations are a source of tensions.

**Dwelling on a boundary: Between psychology and anthropology**

Anthropology and psychology are fields of study with different histories, presuppositions, and aims. While the anthropologist is someone who describes and
develops theories about general questions of specific cultures (Viveiros de Castro, 2002), psychological studies focus on subjective diversity in the context of specific cultures (Valsiner, 1997, 2001a, 2007a, 2007b; Valsiner & Sato, 2006). The specificity of the psychological frame orients the investigative search for an understanding of the heterogeneity among the members of a social group. Despite the differences and specificities of each approach, studies in contemporary cultural psychology recognize their points of contact and tension, which are potentially fruitful for understanding the subjectivity–culture inter-relation (cf. Bathia & Stam, 2005; Boesch, 2008; Cornejo, 2007; Christopher & Bickhard, 2007; Gone, 2008; Josephs, 2002; Ratner, 2008; Toomela, 2008). The individual heterogeneity in specific cultural fields is also a question to some anthropologists. Discussing the

![Figure 1. I-I and I-Other relationship in the field of dialogic interactions between Semiotic-Cultural Constructivism in psychology and Amerindian Perspectivism in anthropology.](image)
Amerindian pan-cosmology, Viveiros de Castro (1987) stresses the importance of shamans’ and leaders’ discursive formulations that “from a common structural base of all Guarani cultures, receive a considerable individual speculative elaboration from specialists” (p. xxxi). The specialists in this case are the individuals who express the cosmological speech:

Guarani cosmology descriptions, by Nimuendaju as Schaden as Cadogan, were made from an intense and focused relation with influent individuals, “informants” who were philosophers and theologists. Therefore, their works do not leave to evoke (in special Cadogan works) famous conversations of Marcel Griaule with Ogotommeteli, the blind wise Dogon; they have the same enchantment and leave the same questions: What is fantastic report and individual elaboration, what is collective tradition? Which are the space and function of cosmological creation in one given culture? Many other questions [...] (Viveiros de Castro, 1987, p. xxxi).

The ethnographic method is usually concerned with an operation of totalization (Baslanger & Dodier, 2004), which involves the depiction of the whole culture through an integration of different collected data. The integrative work on different observational sequences in order to construct a global framework on a culture demands idiosyncratic interpretation of the researcher, who makes use of techniques of discursive elaboration to fill those gaps provoked by the otherness of the other culture on the pathway of exploration. Nevertheless, understanding the other and its culture also implies apprehending how “this specific other” depicts “the others” and “others’ cultures” from its own point of view.

Since the native and the anthropologist are both agents, the interactive process of data collection—and data publication—is always mediated and can be submitted to re-signification from both sides. This makes explicit another point of intersection between psychological and anthropological approaches: both deal with the relational nature of identity and alterity constructions and the possibilities of emergence of a ground of intelligibility in the boundary of the interactions between the participants of a specific meeting, each participant with his or her own cultivated perspective.

Making-believe Amerindians

Amerindian perspectivism proposes the realization of a controlled exercise of imagination, taking the indigenous ideas as concepts and extracting consequences from them (Viveiros de Castro, 2002). I argue that this can be understood as an exercise of sembling the native. The notion of sembling was developed by Baldwin (cf. 1906, p. 123) as a fictional, experiential, and selective procedure on the genesis of reflection. Valsiner (2008) contemporarily explores the notion of sembling emphasizing “a never-ending forward oriented construction cycle where established schemas lead to new created roles for new objects of exploration, while the latter lead to
establishment of ever new schemas” (p. 61). The controlled imagination addresses knowledge construction to the reduction of tension on the crossing of fictional creative freedom and the effort of fitting the object, making viable the emergence of new potentials for further explorations. In this sense, the anthropological theory is concerned with a type of work that is not:

a study of ‘primitive mentality’ (supposing that this notion still have any sense), neither an analysis of indigenous ‘cognitive process’ (supposing that it can be accessible, in the actual state of psychological and ethnographic knowledge). My object is less the indigenous way of thinking than the objects of this thinking, the possible world projected by their concepts. The idea is not to reduce anthropology to a collection of essays about world-views. First, because there is not a conclusive world to be seen, a world before the vision or before the division into visible (thinkable) and invisible (presupposed) that demarcates a thinking horizon. Second, because taking the ideas as concepts refuses its explanation in terms of the transcendent notion of context (ecological, economic, politic, etc.), in favor of the immanent notion of problem, of a problematic field where those ideas are implied. Finally, it is not an interpretative proposition of Amerindian thinking but an experiment with it, and, hence, with our thinking (Viveiros de Castro, 2002, p. 124).

The proposed imaginary experiment addresses ethical and dialogical implications of the investigation, aiming to give voice to the native discourse. In the realm of ethnographic experiences, dialogism appears (cf. Lagrou, 2007) as a way of conceiving not just cultural changes, but also anthropological knowledge, acquired from intense interaction with people of selected groups. Therefore, Amerindian perspectivism criticizes the traditional anthropology that creates a hierarchically valued difference between the meaning that the native gives to their own discourse and the meaning that the anthropologist gives to it:

the problem is not to see the native as object and the solution is not addressed to simply consider him as subject. There is no doubt that the native is a subject; but what can be a subject, that is precisely what the native forces the anthropologist to set as a question (Viveiros de Castro, 2002, pp. 118–119).

For the Amerindians, all beings that are in a subjective position in the cosmos own the same concepts for affectively and cognitively understanding reality; nevertheless, the objective correlative of similar concepts do not coincide. A never-ending forward oriented construction cycle is inevitable because I—other interaction is a source of mistakes, evinced by Amerindian myths thematizing interspecific perspectivism, for instance, those that express that the human protagonist becomes lost deep in the forest and arrives at a strange village; there the inhabitants invite him to drink a refreshing gourd of “manioc beer,” which
he accepts enthusiastically—and, to his horrified surprise, his hosts place in front of him a gourd brimming with human blood. Both the anecdote and the myth turn on a type of communicative disjuncture where the interlocutors are not talking about the same thing, and do not know this (Viveiros de Castro, 2004).

For Amerindians, the belief in a singular objective shared universe where beings are situated is not reliable. Each community or person lives in a world objectively constructed from a struggle of conviviality with partners. Possibilities of sharing specific existential grounds are supposed among groups of people who live together, but this cannot be possible between two specific distinct groups or even persons. At the very moment that more than one point of view interacts, different orientation systems that configure the universe of each being take place. It is not only the gap between subjective fields of orientation, but the world itself, the definition of what is real, that is confronted in the interaction of perspectives. Therefore, the meaning of each thing is in constant negotiation with the meaning attributed to it by others. It is always modified in interchanges of different agencies. In some sense, making-believe otherness is a “method of controlled equivocation” (Viveiros de Castro, 2004), which can be defined as a kind of comparison which takes into account that each interpretation of otherness symbolic action is, per se, an action distinguished from the interpreted one that transforms it.

Final considerations: Meeting otherness’ worlds and multiplying objects

I would like to bring back the Juruna myth presented at the beginning of the article, articulating it with the dialogic methodology scheme (Figure 1). Juruna people consider the relation with savage pigs as a relation with beings that conceive themselves as humans. If there is no transcendental positioning, neither hierarchy or denial of pigs humanity, both would be considered humans in their respective perspectives. Nevertheless, the Jurunas understand that the common sociality of humans and animals depends on a primary discontinuity which is evident through body differences. The supposed animism of the autochthonous people from America, as a postulate that the social relation is built on the basis of the I–world interaction, does not mean ineptitude in distinguishing the psychical from the physical world1 (Viveiros de Castro, 1998). Perspective, here, implies a conception that a world only can exist for someone.

As we have seen, for Amerindian perspectivism, many things in the world are able to dwell on a perspective: it is a situational condition instead of a property of something. Hence, each thing can be apprehended as a subject; the social relation is in the core of the I–world relation. Otherness is conceived as an agentic being that constitutes with its partners a common symbolic ground. Every element in the environment (animals, plants, stones, natural and spiritual things) is thought to belong to an owner, who is a third participant in any I–world relation (Gallois,
A particular perspective can be shared by persons who live together (Lagrou, 2007) and people in this condition have the same owner, acquire a similar body, and start to share a similar reality. Hence, Amerindian perspectivism theory has implications not just for the understanding of structural and institutional patterns of a culture, but also reflecting the processual dynamic of interaction between its participants as active constructors. It demarcates an extended net among highly different beings in the cosmos, which interaction results in knowledge transformations and incremental potentials for action.

The possibility of grasping the experience of otherness demands an effort of living as them, sharing and exchanging substantial affects, food, and corporal fluids through conviviality—this means, in anthropology, a process of becoming consubstantial. Besides this process, someone can imagine how reality is structured by someone else, and the imagination leads to a constructive equivocation. As knowledge construction implies interaction, its outcome is always unknown: each participant of the interaction constructs its symbolic resources articulating the perceptive intersubjective and the imagined intrasubjective experiences, avoiding being totally absorbed by the point of view of the other and losing the possibility of asserting its previous perspective. Kingfisher-head is an instance of someone who died and lost his perspective as a Juruna; he followed the perspective of savage pigs.

Finally, my point here is to explore a general model for I–otherness interaction that can emerge from the interspecific perspectivism, focusing the process of knowledge construction which is developed as an outcome of deepening study and reflection about the intentionality of what is known, determining it as a subject (Lima, 1996; Viveiros de Castro, 2006). Considering that the other in its alterity escapes from the apprehension of the I (cf. Lévinas, 1980; 1993; 2004), then some tension can emerge from the relation, leading to disquieting feelings (cf. Simão, 2003) and to symbolic efforts in order to reduce the emergent tension.

Figure 2 was developed as a schematic model to systematize the process of symbolic resource emergence in the midst of the relation with different perspectives. This duplicates Figure 1, establishing a link between the duplicated planes through an immanent background of originally unknown/non-differentiated affective tendencies, i.e., also related to the mythological flow previously referred. The picture indicates the real and virtual existence of I and otherness’ personal perspectives mutually affecting each other. Lima (1996) indicates that Amerindian perspectivism multiplies the duality of real and virtual, addressing it to other beings and avoiding its reduction (as discussed before, rejecting the idea of a non-perspectival reality or a transcendental being). From a semiotic-cultural point of view, I argue that the multiplication of real and virtual can be understood as a dialogic multiplication, in which the I and the other (for instance, a person, a culture, an idea, or a framework) have relative independent paths of development—mutually interdicted for different grounds of socialization—in the core of a proper immanent mythological/structural background. Some symbolic elaboration can be developed in order to solve, or give sense, to disquieting and unknown urges that can emerge from the immanent relational plan of mutual affective interchange.
Life experiences happen in a continuous and unpredictable flow in which each subject actualizes its possibilities of action in an open and dynamic situation. In this sense, knowledge emerges as personal active constructions of someone about the happenings lived with others, creating problems for integration between intrasubjective and intersubjective plans of human being experience, as represented in Figure 1 and 2 (cf. also Guimarães & Simão, 2007). In the process of I–otherness relation, an imaginative activity takes place in order to fill disquieting gaps which produced some non-adjustments, in desirable and less tensional directions. Besides, because individual actions change the world, it demands an effort of continuous constructive re-structuration to give intelligibility to the lifeworld phenomenon at the core of specific cultural settings.

The multiplication of symbolic objects at the core of cultural interchanges, rather than searching for a relational equivalence, is an important semiotic-cultural problem that Amerindian perspectivism poses for psychology. Consequently, the effort of dealing with Amerindian cosmology, elaborating an inclusive conceptual understanding, is important in the path of grasping a meta-position where different viewpoints are articulated.

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Figure 2. Plans of dialogic injunction and perspective disjunction leading to the emergence of symbolic resources in the lifeworld.
Note

1. Discussions on animism are abundant in psychology and anthropology from Piaget (1929) and Mead (1936) to nowadays (cf. Descola, 2005; Quintanilla & Sarriá, 2003).

References


Author Biography

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