Understanding the Self and Others

Explorations in intersubjectivity and interobjectivity

Edited by
Gordon Sammut, Paul Daanen and
Fathali M. Moghaddam

Routledge

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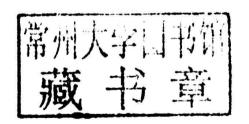Explorations in intersubjectivity and interobjectivity

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How do we, as human beings, come to understand ourselves and others around us? This question could not be more timely or pertinent to the issues facing humankind today. At the heart of many of our world's most troubling political and social problems lies a divergence, and sometimes a sharp contradiction, in perspectives between nations and cultural groups. To find potential solutions to these seemingly intractable divides, we must come to understand what both facilitates and hinders a meaningful exchange of fundamental ideas and beliefs between different cultural groups.

The discussions in this book aim to provide a better understanding of how we come to know ourselves and others. Bringing together a number of cutting edge researchers and practitioners in psychology and related fields, this diverse collection of thirteen papers draws on psychology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, communications and anthropology to explore how human beings effectively come to understand and interact with others. This volume is organised in three main sections to explore some of the key conceptual issues, discuss the cognitive processes involved in intersubjectivity and interobjectivity, and examine human relations at the level of collective processes.

Understanding the Self and Others will appeal to students and scholars of sociology, developmental psychology, philosophy, communication studies, anthropology, identity studies, social and cultural theory, and linguistics.

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Figures

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Jaan Valsiner is one of the founders of the re-birth of cultural psychology at the end of the twentieth century, having established the journal, *Culture and Psychology* (Sage, London) back in 1995 and working as its Editor ever since. In 1995 he was awarded the Alexander von Humboldt Prize in Germany for his interdisciplinary work on human development (with follow-up visits to Germany in 1999 and 2012), and Senior Fulbright Lecturing Award in Brazil 1995–1997. He has been a visiting professor in Brazil, Japan, Australia, Estonia, Germany, Italy, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. He has published and edited over 40 books, of which *The Guided Science* (Transaction Publishers, 2012), *The Guided Mind* (Harvard, 1998) and *Culture and the Development of Children's Action* (Wiley, 1987 and 1997) are most important. He has edited (with Kevin Connolly) the *Handbook of Developmental Psychology* (London: Sage, 2003) as well as the *Cambridge Handbook of Socio-Cultural Psychology* (2007; with Alberto Rosa). He is also the Editor-in-Chief of *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Sciences* (Springer, from 2007) and of the *Oxford Handbook of Psychology and Culture* (2012).

Sabrina Young is a licensed clinical psychologist, having received her Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degrees in clinical psychology. Dr Young has had extensive training in the study of the brain and brain processes. She completed her doctoral dissertation studying the use of neurofeedback with substance abusers and has been involved in a number of other research endeavors since 1994. Dr Young has been employed in the field of neurofeedback since 1998 and completed the formal coursework in EEG neurofeedback recommended by the BCIA. Dr Young is a member of the American Psychological Association and the Society for Neuronal Regulation.

Contents

1 Understanding self and others

Explorations in intersubjectivity and interobjectivity

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How do we human beings come to understand ourselves and others around us? This question could not be more timely or pertinent to the issues facing human-kind today. At the heart of many of our world's most troubling political and social problems lies a divergence, and sometimes a sharp contradiction, in perspectives between nations and/or cultural groups. For example, how should we characterise the seemingly intractable divide between the governments of India and Pakistan, America and Iran, among many others? What lies at the heart of the continuing rifts between Israelis and Palestinians? How has the political divide in the United States taken on such polemic divisions? How are we to make sense of the baffling resistance certain groups of people in many nations have to the overwhelming evidence of the human causes of global climate change?

   In essence, the divergences in all of these perspectives are related to funda-mentally different ways in which groups perceive and value their existence and construct a meaningful picture of who they are in relation to others. Thus, poten-tial solutions to these seemingly intractable divides must come to understand what both facilitates and hinders a meaningful exchange of fundamental ideas and beliefs between different cultural groups. By drawing on multidisciplinary approaches to social psychological phenomena illustrated in these examples, this book draws together a number of cutting edge researchers and practitioners in psychology and related fields. The discussions in this book both review some of the most significant debates concerning how different groups come to share meanings and radically advance this discussion in impactful new directions. While the chapters for the most part explore present and future knowledge, atten-tion is also given to the historical roots of twenty-first century research.

Theoretical antecedents

Many of the current presuppositions concerning human psychology may be retraced to Cartesian philosophy. Descartes was the most influential modern thinker to conceptualise cognition in terms of a consciously reflexive thinking mind, or what he famously called the *cogito*. His influence on the scientific human psychology that evolved from the mid-nineteenth century is unparalleled.

Particularly germane to social psychology and the practical issues mentioned above, two problems resulting from the Cartesian paradigm have been enormously problematic. The first issue has come to be known historically within Philosophy as 'the problem of other minds'; a puzzle that points to the difficulty in accounting for how two individual and independent minds are capable of understanding one another's thoughts and intentions. Intimately associated with the first, the second issue that the Cartesian paradigm provokes is the problem of a knowable and objective reality existing externally to the *cogito*, given that whatever human beings experience with regards to this reality is fundamentally a product of neurological functioning occurring within the brain (Harré and Moghaddam, 2012). Specifically, this problem points towards the difficulty in accounting for how human beings acquire their understandings of the world around them if such understandings are founded in and upon their own idiosyncratic points-of-view (i.e., upon one's own personal and subjective conscious reflections upon the world).

Both of these problems thus lead towards a basic question: how do humans share a social reality given inter-personal differences in individual perceptions and experiences? By addressing this basic question, we aim in this volume to gain a better understanding of how inter-cultural differences in meaning are so difficult to reconcile.

Such reflections on the philosophical dominance of the Cartesian paradigm on the discipline of psychology lead to an interesting conundrum. In spite of the purported – yet taken for granted – fact that one's knowledge of the world begins with one's subjective experiencing of the world, both 'common sense' evidence and social theory point towards the ability of individuals to successfully navigate their social world with mutual reference to themselves and others. In other words, whilst individuals can and do hold their own, to some degree, idiosyncratic points of view as legitimate, rightful and accurate versions of reality, in the course of social interaction individuals communicate their views to others and in so doing open themselves up to the possibility of adjusting or changing their views to fit aspects of reality that lie outside their grasp. Asch (1952) famously called this cognitive process *the interpenetration of views*, which enables human subjects to adjust or correct errors in their own thinking.

The everyday use of money in our societies provides an apt example. Consider two individuals with two very different subjective opinions of the value and role of money. John, for instance, feels that money must be prized and valued as a measure of one's hard work and determination. Dan, in contrast, views money as an evil that serves to create unnecessary and harmful class divisions in society. However, both John and Dan do not hesitate to use money as a medium of exchange when getting on a train to go to work. Furthermore, John and Dan are both capable of conversing with each other about monetary issues, such as which train fare is cheapest for getting them both to their destinations. Irrespective of the differences in subjective understandings accorded to the object of money, there still exist other public characteristics to objects whose meanings are taken for granted by all who share a similar cultural framework of

knowledge that enables human beings holding diverse points of view to interact in mutually meaningful ways.

Our environment possesses characteristics of objectivity that lead us to interact with others on the basis of a reality that we hold to exist independent of our subjective experiencing of it. Humans assume this reality in their everyday affairs, believing that what they perceive is at least in some important respects what others also perceive and that what lies in their environment does so independently of their individual perception of it. According to Asch (1952), this characteristic of human nature enables individuals to engage in a process of social verification. Individuals are able to check with others the correctness of their perceptions by using the experiences of others as a verification and justification of their own. They would not do this unless they assumed that the world exists objectively and independently of them.

Yet on the other hand, the world for the subject only ever exists subjectively. There is no colour in the world for the subject who perceives no colour, no matter what anyone else might say. The subjectivity of human cognition does not thus match the social character of human behaviour. How then are we to reconcile this difference? How do individuals move from subjective experience to socially shared constructions?

Intersubjectivity: solving the problem of other minds through perspective taking

The concept of intersubjectivity is one of the chief ways these Cartesian inspired difficulties have been addressed in social theory. This concept postulates the existence of a 'mechanism of interpretation' by which two or more people bridge the gap between their own subjective and isolated meaningful worlds by imagining what the world of the other person is like on the basis of their own self-understanding. The concept of intersubjectivity, which conceptualises this mechanism, has come to occupy a preeminent place in the social sciences.

Numerous theorists have used the concept of intersubjectivity to account for interpersonal relations in various ways (see Coelho and Figuereido, 2003; Cornish and Gillespie, 2009). For theorists working in the clinical tradition of psychology, intersubjectivity has, by and large, come to encompass the set of interactions between infant and primary care giver(s) that account for the gradual development of adult capabilities in the infant (e.g., Stern, 1985; Fonagy and Target, 1996; Barr, this volume; Lamiell, this volume). However, the most widespread understanding of intersubjectivity in social psychological theory, and the one that most contributions in this volume address, is that of interpersonal intersubjectivity. Interpersonal intersubjectivity rests on an understanding of gestures as intention-laden partial acts to which others respond. The meaning of a situation is co-constructed and defined in the course of social interaction itself, by which the gestures (and intentions) of one person become significant to the other person(s) participating in the encounter. This understanding of intersubjectivity has featured most prominently in the works of George Herbert Mead (see

Daanen and Sammut, 2012). The following extract from Flick *et al.* (2004, p. 6) aptly illustrates just how the pre-eminence of the concept of intersubjectivity has rooted itself in our social scientific understanding of society and human social relationships:

> social reality may be understood as the result of meanings and contexts that are jointly created in social interaction. Both are interpreted by the participants in concrete situations within the framework of their subjective relevance horizons (Schuetz, 1962) and therefore constitute the basis of shared meanings that they attribute to objects, events, situations and people (Blumer, 1969). These meanings they constantly modify and 'frame' (Goffman, 1974) according to the context in reaction to the meanings of others. In this sense social realities appear as a result of constantly developing processes of social construction.
>
> (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: p. 6)

In essence, then, the idea of intersubjectivity postulates that, through social interaction, distinct individuals (subjectivities or subjects) can negotiate between them a reality that suits them. In this reality, a person's own idiosyncratic experiences are reconciled with those of others through communication and negotiation – at least reconciled sufficiently enough to enable joint action. Thus, this process serves to create a common and shared reality that incorporates the distinct meanings present for each individual. By virtue of an intersubjective social reality, people are able to orientate themselves to others in order to meet their everyday needs through interaction. While subjects may never gain access to the subjective content of other minds, or to the objective character of the world, a negotiated intersubjective social field allows all to function.

As Coelho and Figuereido's (2003) characterisation makes clear, intersubjectivity has become a polysemic term in social and psychological theory that is utilised in different ways to address the relations of Self and Other. We recognise that theories of intersubjectivity have an important place in the explanation of human behaviour. For one, this is particularly evident in developmental theories, as children have yet to develop a full knowledge of the social world (in addition to a reflective knowledge of their own thoughts and feelings) and therefore require an intersubjective engagement with adults in order to learn the meanings of these situations. Moreover, we also contend that a level of intersubjective engagement between adults is often necessary in situations characterised by a rupture or breakdown of meaning, such as in interpersonal encounters that require an active negotiation of understanding between two cognising subjects (see Daanen and Sammut, 2012; Daanen and Young, this volume).

We contend, however, that an endemic issue in the conceptualisation and appropriate utilisation of intersubjectivity as a framework for understanding human interaction is its fundamental reliance on the cognising subject. Insofar as intersubjectivity refers to the active and interactive negotiation of understanding between cognising subjects it remains, by definition, meditational. For intersubjectivity to

take place, cognising subjects must come face to face with another cognising subject who presents to them a subjective experience out of which they are required to make sense. In negotiating this sense-making, individuals necessarily engage in reflective interaction that gives meaning to their own acts and those of others.

Yet if we reflect on the nature of the vast majority of the mundane interactions that constitute our daily lives, this constant need to negotiate meanings with others does not match our everyday phenomenal reality. If we refer back to the example of money mentioned above, we may see just how foreign this process of intersubjective negotiation is to our common sense experience of engaging with others in the world. Although Dan might vehemently disagree with John that money is a positive good to be pursued, he still doesn't hesitate to use a $20 bill in order to buy his friend John coffee while in the midst of a heated debate. Thus, on one level, John and Dan can disagree strongly over the role of money in society on a conscious level, yet still implicitly take-for-granted the meaning of money as a medium of exchange. It is this taken-for-granted level of cultural meaning that theories of intersubjectivity fail to consider in sufficient measure. It is also, we think, the precise area where problems of intercultural relations so often lie.

In other words, intractable misunderstandings occur due to those meanings that people fundamentally take-for-granted and about which they are thus unable to reflect due to their elemental character in composing a group's social reality. For the individual, an alternative view contrasting with these fundamental beliefs that shape a clear and meaningful social reality appears as illogical, crazy or downright abhorrent (Asch, 1952; Benhabib, 2002). It is precisely in areas related to this example that this volume presents an innovative view.

Interobjectivity: the new and evolving concept

In recent years, a novel concept has been posited to address the problem of reality and other minds – *interobjectivity*. Despite its brief history, different definitions of the term have been advanced (see Sammut *et al.*, 2010) such that interobjectivity can be understood as (1) object-mediated interactions (Latour, 1996), and (2) overarching and taken-for-granted objectifications (Moghaddam, 2003).

Latour's (1996) conception makes a case for granting social agency to artefacts, rejecting intersubjectivity on the basis that human relations are framed and structured by the use of objects. Interobjectivity, in Latour's sense, captures the facet of human relations that do not require the physical co-presence of subjects due to the fact that they are mediated by objects. Accordingly, Latour argues that objects are implicated in social reality just as much as subjects, because action is delegated to inanimate objects by human subjects. Latour reveals how the nature of human intention itself is lodged within objects. Bauer (this volume) gives the example of the use of a wall in keeping pedestrians off one's lawn. In this way, the wall itself is in interaction with anyone who encounters it. The intention of keeping others off one's lawn is present (or objectified) in the object of the wall.