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The Space of Responsibility of Cultural Psychology

Benson, Ciarán, *The Cultural Psychology of Self: Place, Morality and Art in Human Worlds.* London: Routledge, 2001. 264 pp. ISBN 0–415–08904–2 (hbk); ISBN 0–415–08905–0 (pbk).

The author describes his book as a series of essays, but one can see that the series presents a whole new approach to the development of self. Distinctive features of the book include a combination of excellent styles in the essays, in-depth analysis of the most complex problems of psychology, and an explicitly expressed moral position on the part of the author.

Ciarán Benson considers self a multi-level locative system to navigate physical and social worlds. This approach allows him to cover and effectively unite subjects that usually are considered by different branches of biology, neuroscience, psychology, ethics, policy and philosophy. A pivot of the book is an analysis of how humans locate, transform, extend and diminish spaces of possibility for them, constructing each other and themselves, and what types of cultural tools they create for these aims.

The author considers Antonio Damasio's framework of the structure of human selfhood, including mutually related development of proto-self, core-self and autobiographical self, and develops it towards new directions. The initial points of Benson's analysis deal with the

development of the biological roots of self, especially features of brain structures, which create possibilities for movement from simple reactivity to increasing autonomy. They also influence the reverse movement from autonomy to 'automatony' (e.g. for different brain damages). (The opposition 'autonomy vs automatony' is excellent.) The distinctive feature of the essays concerning this topic is that morphology and functioning of brain, motor-perceptual system, and so on, are considered mutually determined by and mutually related to the cultural essence of the human self. The mutual influences of brains, bodies and societies (reflected, for example, in variable and transforming maps of social worlds) opens the door for brain-reshaping practices as a constitutive part of the culture (pp. 114–115). Creation, use and changes of brain structure through these mutual influences seems to be one of the greatest cultural tools of human selves.

Integration of self is considered to be a meta-narrative task performed with special cultural tools. Benson develops a conception of the narrative structure of self (i.e. the idea that self is storytelling, and my self is a story told by me to myself and to key people, who are an integral part of myself) and applies it to the formation of different kinds of identity, especially national identity. Taking Ireland as one of the impressive examples, he reveals close relationships, both analogous and symbiotic, between personal and national identity.

The author's reasoning and arguments concerning these and other issues are subordinated to the governing idea that 'human selves are substantially linguistic and dialogical in their construction' (p. 10). Culture is a 'great network or web or conversation of endlessly symbolizing, continuously remaking and ceaselessly communicating minds' (pp. 53–54).

These capacities for communication and symbolization make way for endless human creativity. Self is always incomplete, an unfolding creative project. A mechanism of this unfolding is that we are both 'the users and the vehicles' for the perpetuation of ideas about ourselves and the world (p. 161). We shape means, which in turn shape us; creative work and a creative worker are mutually constitutive. A problem is that the unpredictable creativity of self-transforming selves can develop into both the best and worst of humanity, both good and evil.

Aims and Cultural Tools To Diminish and Extend Spaces of Possibility

Notions of good and evil are an integral and alienable part of the human self; the psychological and the moral are inextricable (p. 61).

Developing this basic statement of the book, the author introduces a fundamental opposition of two types of specially created tools, namely tools to diminish spaces of possibility for humans, and tools to extend them. (Naturally, any tool has its own merits and demerits, and an increase of possibilities in definite areas with the help of a tool is [inseparably] linked with limitations of possibilities in some other areas. Yet a main point of the book is profound analysis of premeditated creation and the use of tools that are aimed mainly either to diminish or to extend human worlds.) Ciarán Benson shows that human work on different tools of these two opposite types makes a constitutive, if not the most important, part of human selves. The hierarchy and correlation of work on tools of both types are mutually related with orientations of different people and general directions of development of a culture. A very important expression of this hierarchy is that some societies value, allow and stimulate personal navigation of human worlds, self-creation and self-realization by giving their members skills and values to do this, but some other societies do not (p. 92). (It seems to me that it resonates with the statement that the development of individuals, social groups and societies is under the influence of two opposite and interrelated types of social interactions: (a) stimulation of exploration, learning, education and development; and (b) counteraction and inhibition (Poddiakov, 1999, 2000, 2001). Both approaches seem parts of a synthesis that is necessary to understand culture in its moral and cognitive dimensions.)

Benson considers two opposite poles of human activity that mark a continuum between more ordinary activities. On the one hand, he analyzes a system of aims and specially designed cultural means to diminish human selves, including torture, tools of physical, social and moral disorientation and dislocation in Nazi concentration camps, and the Holocaust as a whole cultural phenomenon. He also considers some other impressive examples concerning pitiless regimes, different crimes, and so on. Benson shows that a general purpose of tools in this area is to diminish the human self by destruction of its high levels (i.e. intellectual, moral, social) and reduction to its lowest ones, until the human self is turned into flesh (e.g. if tortured). All these tools cause negative absorption.

To consider aims and means of the opposite type, he addresses art and love as phenomena causing positive absorption and extension of spaces of self. A reader of the book can find remarkable descriptions of the tools of art, especially visual art. Benson pays special attention to the phenomenon that he calls 'no-point-of-view' perspective, expressed in works of the American artist James Turrell. These works

allow viewers to experience absolutely new and wonderful feelings, related with synaesthesia and illusions of change in the boundaries of self.

Key notions concerning the extension and diminishing of human worlds are moral agency, cruelty, empathy and compassion. Both cruelty and compassion are rooted in some of the same cognitive capacities, based on empathy (p. 150). Empathy is not sympathy. Empathy can help an aggressor to understand her or his victim and to use that understanding to create circumstances that are most horrible for the victim.

The capacities of cruelty and compassion, based on empathy, are found in children from at least the age of two (e.g. they understand how to annoy siblings by spoiling a game, verbal teasing, etc., and do it deliberately, feeling malicious joy) (pp. 141–150). Thus, moral agency as a constitutive part of self emerges at an early age. It has biological roots in a tendency to categorize environment from a relational view ('I/we/others'), but cannot be reduced to them. The author emphasizes that concepts of social world, identity and belief are necessary to explain sympathy and cruelty. Social worlds have distinctive identities that are constituted by beliefs, values and ideals, especially by beliefs about good and evil, and the 'ideal self' of a society. They in turn shape individual selfhood by the 'make-a-person' practices (p. 136) of this society.

It is of great interest how Ciarán Benson analyzes whole and complex situations without one-to-one relations between activities that diminish and extend human worlds. He is concerned with situations in which diminishing in some areas and for some people is considered by someone to be a condition of extension in other areas or for other people. One of the most expressive examples is in the formation of national independence and identity. The author analyzes the roles of language, literature, visual art, church and education in the formation of identity, and shows how control in these domains (e.g. by censorship) can turn a country into an 'intellectual and moral wasteland', using O'Flaherty and Becket's expression (p. 219). (An example of censors' activity is the prohibition of Margaret Mead's works in Ireland several decades ago because the works dealt with issues of sexual development [pp. 218–219].) Such control of language, art and education can inhibit people's capacities for self-interpreting and self-realization, not only in the prohibited areas, but also in their social and moral development as a whole.

One of the main ideas of the book proves to be that some societies stimulate development of their members in definite directions and

limit or prohibit other directions; in contrast with other societies, which have other systems of historically and culturally determined orienting ideals and make-a-person practices.

Self-Responsibility for Development: From Zones to Spaces

Make-a-person practices include the teaching of less competent members of a society by more competent and influential ones. For decades a key notion orienting developmental studies of this process has been Vygotsky's well-known 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). In the classical Vygotskian approach, the ZPD is defined as things that a child cannot learn by him- or herself but can learn with the help and support of an adult or a more advanced person. Benson makes a short, but very important and sharp point: that a limiting principle of this approach to learning is that it describes only ways in which children develop competencies under the tutorial guidance of more competent persons, but not the development of responsibility, including moral responsibility, that should be connected with the increasing competencies (p. 140). Then Benson goes on to concentrate on deploying an analysis of the development of responsibility itself.

Another limitation of the classical concept of the ZPD is that it describes only one direction of development, or, to use Benson's terms, the extension of learners' worlds by make-a-person practices, and ignores the possibility of the opposite direction, that is, diminishing them. To overcome limitations of this sort, different researchers have formulated some new concepts of zones of development. Asmolov (1996) describes zones of inhibited and hampered development, in which gifted children cannot develop their abilities because of the negative influences of mass education. A similar concept of zone of negative development is used by Diaz and Hernandez (1998) to analyze the teaching of students from national minorities. To reflect the possible positive effects of others' counteractions to a learner, the zone of proximal development can be defined as things that a person cannot learn by himself or herself, but can learn and develop in the course of counteraction with other persons (Poddiakov, 1999, 2000). The reasons for this seeming incongruity are the high motivation of fights, the creativity aimed at overcoming the barriers set up by counteracting persons, and the aim-directed learning of new information and strategies from the other in spite of the counteraction. It seems to me that the concepts mentioned above can be useful to consider the

dialectical unity of extending and diminishing human worlds through make-a-person practices.

It is of great interest to contrast the classical ZPD concept with Benson's concept of space of responsibility. I believe that the latter, when applied to very important situations, can be of a higher order than is the notion of the ZPD (though Ciarán Benson does not contrast these notions in any way).

Benson's approach would also seem to reveal a moral dimension to the ZPD. He addresses the issue of child-soldiers, for example the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the child-soldiers in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and so on. (In total, over 300,000 children under the age of 18 took part in hostilities around the world in 1999 [p. 140].) He emphasizes that very often children become 'successful' soldiers and pitiless killers because of their malleability and the immoral, but effective, 'tutorial guidance' of adults. The ZPD of these children allows them easily to learn how to torture and kill under the tutorial guidance of more competent killers, and easily to learn the values of 'the ideal soldier' in the course of interactions with these 'more advanced' persons. In less extreme, but more frequent cases, children are taught to steal, swindle, and so on.

The ZPD is determined not only by the information-proceeding capacity of the learner, but also by his or her social competence, ability to understand the teachers' desires and values (i.e. empathy), and readiness to follow these desires and values. (Naturally, the ZPD depends on the teachers' abilities and efforts too, but here I consider the learners' party.) If the ZPD of the learner is too large, not only will his or her abilities to cope with new information be heightened, but there will also be unlimited readiness of this person to follow anyone who looks more competent or influential than him- or herself. It, in turn, means that such a person is 'amorphous and without fixed identity. . . . He is other-shaped rather than self-created' (p. 134).

This is the contradictory and ambivalent essence of learning ability and instruction. Conceptual means that can help to resolve the problems of the ZPD with the development of identity and morality seem to be the notions of moral agency and space of responsibility, described by the author.

Our space of responsibility is determined by our idea of what we ought to do and what we must not do in one or another situation. Not doing enough to fill the space of responsibility means that a person feels less than his or her ideal. It causes shame, guilt and remorse. Doing enough in the space of responsibility causes satisfaction and pride

(p. 172). Using the metaphor of space of responsibility, Benson shows that development of self is not only under the control of the 'tutorial guidance' of different teachers, narratives, and so on, but also under the control of moral agency and the self-responsibility of a learner.

A mechanism of this control is that a person does not allow him- or herself to deploy some capacities of the self, because the appropriate actions are unthinkable for the person to make or to learn. S/he understands that s/he has real possibilities to do these things, but s/he will never do them, being the sort of person s/he is (p. 133). In other words, it is unthinkable for the person to come into some zones of development. Based on another statement of Benson's, that often an oppressor's space of responsibility for his or her actions is, in a paradoxical way, much less than his or her victim's space of responsibility for inactions, one can develop the idea that a teacher's space of responsibility for teaching can be much less than his or her learner's space of responsibility for refusal to be taught.

From time to time we must appreciate such a refusal very much. For example, the author describes a situation in which a dozen of 500 Nazi policemen from Reserve Police Battalion 101 refused to shoot defenseless Jewish women and children. Perhaps most of us will be far from thinking of these 12 men as good people, because they voluntarily joined the Battalion. Yet they refused to make 'the last step', that is, to really kill. In this group of killers, they were 'the worst learners' of Nazi ideology and practice of genocide, like *rara avis*. (It is not mentioned if they tried to 'improve' themselves after the refusal or, by contrast, leave the Battalion.)

A refusal to kill or make another immoral action in spite of 'orders from above', 'tutorial guidance', and so on, seems an important, if not critical, moment in the development of self. (Moreover, such a refusal can serve as a base for a story or a narrative for many people. For example, a very popular Russian poet and singer-songwriter, Vladimir Vysotsky, whose many songs were prohibited by Soviet censorship, but distributed via many personal tape-recordings in spite of the prohibitions, wrote a song, 'He Who Did Not Shoot', about a soldier who refused to participate in the military execution of his friend.)

In other situations the ZPD may not be diminished by the pressure of self-responsibility, but rather extended, if a person feels the responsibility to learn something, even in spite of a lack in her or his capacities, or direct counteraction from others.

Thus, it seems that Benson's notion of space of responsibility is better able than the ZPD to describe and understand mechanisms of learning

in difficult and ambivalent social and moral situations. Responsibility can control zones of development, affect developmental trajectories and change relations between diminishing and extending human worlds, affecting the hierarchy of good and evil.

Prognosis

Is it possible to predict the unpredictable creativity of human selves that try to diminish and extend their own and each other's worlds? Naturally, any exact prediction seems impossible. Yet a discussion of some general trends of development in this area seems necessary.

Ciarán Benson expresses very alert optimism. He writes that 'the excessive infliction of pain and suffering is becoming a touchstone of societal quality' (p. 226). Beliefs about repulsiveness of these actions are becoming more popular and (may be) robust. Yet a problem remains in that, constructing our future, we are able to create new reasons, conditions and tools to diminish other individuals or groups of humans. The only guaranteed antidote can be 'sympathetic empathy for all categories of human beings as a feature of national and personal identities' (p. 159). Yet he has doubts, wondering if perhaps this is a quixotic aspiration.

Concerning such an integral part of culture as learning, considered by Benson as the proper domain of a cultural psychology of self, it seems reasonable to suppose the following. The future development of civilization and emergence of new domains and activities will result not only in the development of aims and means of instruction and education for those activities, but also in the development of new aims and new means of counteraction to them (Poddiakov, 2000). The first reason for this assertion is that both positive and negative feedback are necessary to control any system in an effective way. Even honest and good control of development includes not only support, but also inhibition of undesirable ways of development. The other reason is dishonest competition and rivalry. A blow to one's abilities to learn and acquire competencies in new activities and domains is a most effective way to make a competitor inadequate in the modern technological and social world.

Moreover, it seems that new, emerging cultural tools will be involved both in the development of learning and in the counteraction to it. For example, we know about some modern technical devices that are intended to locate, orient and disorient others (in the domains of military counteraction, such as air forces' location and navigation; in

high-competitive business, etc.). This trend can develop towards a new area of learning. If the design of artificial intellectual systems 'able to learn' is considered by people as a real direction of development in these areas, they will also try to design systems able to counteract human learning, to counteract other systems' learning, and able to learn in conditions of counteraction to their own learning. (I apply terms 'intellect' and 'learning' for artificial devices in the limited sense that includes not real self-change, self-learning and creativity, but improving decision-making, based on modifications of data collected.) Then these high-tech devices can be turned into tools for everyday life. Computer wars between modern hackers and various institutions can be a source of hardware and software of this sort.

In this context the following idea of Ciarán Benson is of extreme importance. Psychology is not a neutral observer of the development of society and a finder of universal laws underlying human essence, but rather 'a contributing player' that co-constructs spaces of this development. In some measure, whether people will create new cultural tools to diminish spaces of development or extend them depends on psychology too. Make (cultural tools of) love, not war. This is the space of responsibility of psychology as a science, which must be based on morality, and the spaces of personal responsibility of individual psychologists. This is explicitly shown in the profound investigation presented in the book reviewed.

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Biography

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