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# Sensuality in Human Living

The Cultural Psychology of Affect



Carl-Gustav Carus Winterlandschaft mit verfallenem Tor. 1816-1819

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# Preface

Some book projects take long time to develop. This is one of those. I can trace its origins back to year 2000 when—in defiance to the usual preoccupation of child and adolescent psychologists with the emerging sexuality in adolescence I claimed that instead it is the *heterosensuality* (Valsiner 2000, pp. 284–291) that unites the bodily fascination with sex with the higher affective constructions of new experiences by the inquisitive youngsters. It was the phenomena of adolescents’ feelings into their environment—and their bodily relations in traditional Gikuyu *ngweko*<sup>1</sup> practices as well as living together in the Muria *ghotul*<sup>2</sup>—that fascinated me. It led me to look beyond the trivial “who has sex with whom and when?” gossipers’ question to the wider issue of affective embodiment in human lives. What is important for general human psychology of human beings is the meaningful relating with one’s body from the basic physiological processes upwards to the highest psychological functions of religiosity, ethical reasoning, and devotional practices.

Within the cultural psychology of semiotic mediation—which is the basis for my analytic efforts in this book—sexuality becomes subsumed into the more general domain of sensuality. This focus goes beyond the sexual desires—coming into focus in relating to the beauty of one’s own and others’ bodies, the aesthetics of underwear (Valsiner 2019c), and the appreciation of art. In the past, I was (and continue to be) fascinated by the devotional sensuality of *devadasi* temple dancers in India (Valsiner 1996). Those highly educated and dedicated women—dismissed by the British colonizers as “prostitutes”—were of central relevance for the highest fabric of societal and personal life organization in Hindu religiously framed lives. To discount the devadasi as “prostitutes” is an example of ideologically based social myopia that stops our understanding of deep sensual experiences of our living. Likewise, any stigmatizing dismissal of women who are earning their living as “sex workers” I consider a similar self-imposed limit upon our capacity to understand that only

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<sup>1</sup>Heterosensual caressing practices of the Gikuyu traditional village relations of adolescents, with strict prohibition against premarital sexual relations.

<sup>2</sup>Muria village dormitory described by Vernon Elwin (1944) and elaborated by Nicolas Prevot (2014) where children and adolescents were introduced to heterosensual sharing.

rarely has been kept open (Albert 2001). Like many artists and *literati* of the past and the present, I have deep respect for women in these complicated yet very human professional roles (White 1990) that play an important role in our bodily experiencing. Psychological research needs to look beyond the social stigmatization of any social “outgroups” and treat human beings of any professions with respect and efforts to understand their lives.

My interest in the central role of sensuality has grown in the past two decades in very concrete ways. Back in 2003, this took the form of a general claim:

Human *psyche* is culturally constructed subjective reality. Sensuality is the starting condition for human adaptation, and it becomes the arena for cultural regulation of the human *psyche*. Contrary to the traditions of psychoanalysis that have emphasized the unconscious basis for the human psyche, a cultural-psychological analysis concentrates on the transformation of the domain of personal affect into semiotic mediation fields that regulate conduct in *toto*. (Valsiner 2003, p. 151, added underlining)

This bold claim is in the center of development of ideas in the present book. Later, in an effort to explain the centrality of affect in cultural psychology to wider audiences I borrowed from the quasi-autobiographical reported experiences of James Joyce in his exploration of the urban world of Dublin (Valsiner 2014, pp. 165–166).

What are the *semiotic mediation fields*? I have suggested (Valsiner 2006) that most of our generalizing affective functions are organized by field-like signs that give flavor to the settings of everyday life. In common sense terms, these amount to the notion of psychological atmospheres. Our sensual relating with the world creates continuity across settings. That is encoded in field-like signs and allows for not only generalization but also hyper-generalization—generalizing affectively beyond generalized meanings. The key concept of hyper-generalization that is central for the coverage in this book was already present back in 2003, but its functioning in the process of modulation between the mundane and the sublime took years to emerge (Valsiner 2019a). I hope that this little book gives a faithful account of a theoretical perspective that would escape the routine reduction of complex phenomena of human ways of living to oversimplified images of hidden and not so hidden sexualities.

On my way to understanding this basic reversal of the habitual focus on sexuality to that of life-course long sensuality, I have benefitted from many colleagues and friends. Nandita Chaudhary, Pina Marsico, Luca Tateo, Tania Zittoun, Jensine Nedergaard, Angela Branco, Maria Lyra, Livia Simao, Eleonora Magomedova, and Emily Abbey have kept guiding me towards overcoming my own cultural background limitations and non-poetic tendencies. The “Kitchen Seminar”—first at Clark University and then in Aalborg—has allowed me to play with constant drafts of different ideas that transcend the usual trivialities of psychological “literatures.” Above all I am grateful to the many ordinary women and men who have shared with me their aesthetic and sensual experiences. Thank you—Vika, Oxana, Christine, Leticia, Jacira, Ana, Petro, Sylvia, and many others—for letting me benefit from your struggles for making your ordinary lives extraordinary.

# Introduction

## Sensuality in Focus: The Human *Psyche* Beyond the Lures of Sexuality

Sexuality is a topic of never-ending fascination—in ordinary life and in psychology. Sexual motives are projected into almost anything that human beings do—or do not do. Almost no oblong object can escape the fate of becoming naively interpreted as a representation of a penis. We may relate to these in various ways—ranging from fascinated acceptance to sarcastic denial—but in all cases the suggested centrality of sexuality is being fortified as a cornerstone of the human psyche and even of human societies.

In this little book, I distance our theoretical focus from this fixation upon sexuality. I posit that it is the wider affective realm of bodily relating with the world—sensuality—that is the core of human psychological functioning. By emphasizing sensuality rather than focusing on sexuality, I hope to provide a unifying perspective between the lower and higher psychological functions.

However, this theoretical move is complicated. The notion of sensuality has established—yet vague—meaning in the common language which makes it easy to use the term but difficult to give it sufficient theoretical precision. Coming from French—*sensualité*—following Latin *sensualitas* (“sensibility, capacity for sensation”) the common sense term reaches English in two sub-strains of a noun:

Uncountable: the *state of being* sensual, sensuous, or sexy

Countable: a *preoccupation with* sensuous pleasure

The state-of-being notion is tautological (sensuality is being sensual) while the second meaning—preoccupation—involves an implicit process of striving—hence potentially productive for theory. Yet a theory of sensuality cannot be built upon limited notion of *pleasure* and the marking of insistence (*preoccupation*). It needs to take on a general process focus with the whole range of affective phenomena created

by our senses—from pleasure to non-pleasure—involved.<sup>1</sup> So, let me offer a general definition:

Sensuality is the general and constant relating with the world through affective creation of meaningfulness in one's life.

This definition is admittedly recognizing subjectivity (as it is centered on the only possible knower—oneself). The theme—sensuality—is necessarily centered within the person—it is *my* feeling of the sensuousness of the mountain panorama I am observing—even if you are standing next to me and observing the same panorama. Furthermore, this definition recognizes the situatedness of subjectivity in irreversible time (“constant relating”) and the open systemic nature<sup>2</sup> of human living (“relating with the world”). It is axiomatically built upon the notion of construction of signs (semiotic mediation—Valsiner 2014, 2019a, b) that sets up the person's relation to oneself (“meaningfulness”—accessible only to the introspection of the person who constructs it). Yet it is a *general* process—integrating from the flow of ongoing encounters with the world the hyper-generalized *feeling of being-in-a-state* (of pleasure, or pain, or pleasurable pain, etc.). This hyper-generalized (Valsiner 2019b) sign field can be of different range of extension in time—from the moment of orgasm (see Chap. 2) to that of life-time enduring feelings about one's life (e.g., fatalism).

In everyday life, sensuality comes into function in multiple domains. Sexuality is only one of the domains of sensuality—there are many others that in our daily lives are by far more basic for our ways of being. The sensual pleasures of drinking a cup of coffee or champagne, or eating a gourmet meal, or taking a shower or lazily immersing oneself in a jacuzzi are all examples of total bodily relating to one's own self through bodily experiences that may at times transform into sexual feelings—but not in an obligatory way. Sometimes drinking champagne is just enjoyment of the champagne, or of the given moment, without becoming a part of a chain of seductive acts. Under other circumstances, preparing a meal for somebody else can be part of maintaining the basis for sexual relationships.<sup>3</sup> Feelings of sexual kind emerge in the context of sensuality. Yet they need not emerge, as sensuality is the general wholistic field (*Ganzheit*) that is the basis of our whole being-in-the-world.

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<sup>1</sup> See the argument for unity of opposites within a whole—A and non-A united and mutually relating (Josephs et al. 1999) as a theoretical prerequisite for theory building in psychology.

<sup>2</sup> Elaborated in Valsiner (2017b) chapter 1. All open systems depend on the constant exchange relations with environments. This basic feature is known in biology since late nineteenth century but has not fully entered into psychology even in our time.

<sup>3</sup> Clark (1989) shows how for an Asante woman trader in the market cooking a meal for man is the indicator of sexual relationship and a vehicle for its maintenance. Women express their anger with husbands “... by persistent carelessness in cooking, or by refusing to cook altogether.. A wife becomes extremely suspicious if her husband loses his appetite, especially in the evening. She will accuse him of eating somewhere else (with someone else), or of not liking her food” (Clark 1989, p. 327). The practice of feeding young males' semen to pre-initiated boys for promoting growth of their male bodies in various societies in New Guinea (Godelier 2003, 2011) is a further proof of the linkages of sexuality and alimentation.



Listening to Gregorian chants is a deeply sensual experience with no transformation into sexual feelings. Parents' deep appreciation of the beauty of their children does not transfer into sexual feelings in an overwhelming number of cases. In some it may—with the result that is deeply morally rejected as sexual abuse. In a similar vein, observing classic nude sculptures or paintings in a museum leads to the transfer of sensual feelings into aesthetic ones, rather than to a desire to imagine the muscular David of Michelangelo's as a partner in the intimacy of one's bed. Eating raw oysters can be a sensual experience of tasting exquisite gourmet rather than intake of aphrodisiacs for improving one's sexual performance. And so on.

Looking at the fixation on sexuality by psychologists and anthropologists, the French anthropologist Maurice Godelier pointed out that the fascination with sexuality is not that of actual inter-coital experiences but that of a symbolic remove:

When asked to define, on the basis of their professional experience, what a sexual act is for them, the anthropologist and the psychoanalyst apparently find themselves in distinct, but from a certain standpoint, similar, situation. Neither is the habit of observing sexual acts directly in the course of their practice. At first sight, it seems that their experience consists of how people do or don't talk about sex. But the two probably do not receive the same discourse and therefore are not interpreting the same realities. (Godelier 2003, p. 179)

In addition to no direct access to sexuality in practice, there is a lack of conceptual access due to the different kinds of signs that could be used or are used to depict sexualities. While common sense depictions are made in categorical language with precisely determined signs (point-like signs), the whole sexual encounter is presentable in different kinds of signs (field-like signs) which may have vague borders. The sensual encounter that may lead to sexual relationship is ambiguous as its situational features allow for multiple pathways of meaning construction. It is only very rarely when scientists have attempted to enter the deeply private domain of actual inter-coital acts that evidence about the psychological processes involved is recorded (see Chap. 2 for an elaborate analysis).

To summarize—in this book I look at the semiotic organization of sensuality in general terms. This makes affective life the center of the *psyche* and lets it be of importance in varied domains of human experiences. These domains are subjectively organized in hierarchical orders. For our purposes in this book sexuality is not only *one* domain of sensuality, but a *subordinated* domain that serves the general role of sensuality in the human *psyche*. Its closest parallel among different everyday life domains is alimentation—we not only *take in* nutrients but *enjoy* (or hate<sup>4</sup>) eating different foods based on our hyper-generalized value systems.<sup>5</sup>

Sensuality is the general term to cover the whole array of hyper-generalized affective complexes. Fields of sensuality can be transformed into differentiated opposites—sexuality on the one side and deep morally felt-through ways of conduct

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<sup>4</sup>The conversion of people into vegetarian or vegan eating prescriptions for oneself is a good example of the specific hyper-generalized affective rejection of specific categories of possible nutrients.

<sup>5</sup>Additional proof of this closeness is the similarity of lexicon used in discourses about both alimentary and coital acts (Stone 1954).

on the other. It is the processes of such transformation that constitute the core of specifically human higher level psychological processes built on intentionality and aided by cultural guidance (Valsiner 1998, 2007, 2014, 2019a, b). These processes include resistances of various kinds (Chaudhary et al. 2017) and—at the level of persons in their life contexts—illustrate the deep dialogicality of human psychological existence (Hermans 2001; Zittoun et al. 2013a). What needs to be accomplished is to find out about the dynamic organization of the human *psyche*—including the totality from lowest (close to instinctive) to the highest (values and appreciation of aesthetic feelings) levels. The relationships between these levels are usually contradictory. In this small book, I have the aim of elaborating the various pathways of transformation of sensuality into specific—often mutually opposed—forms.

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