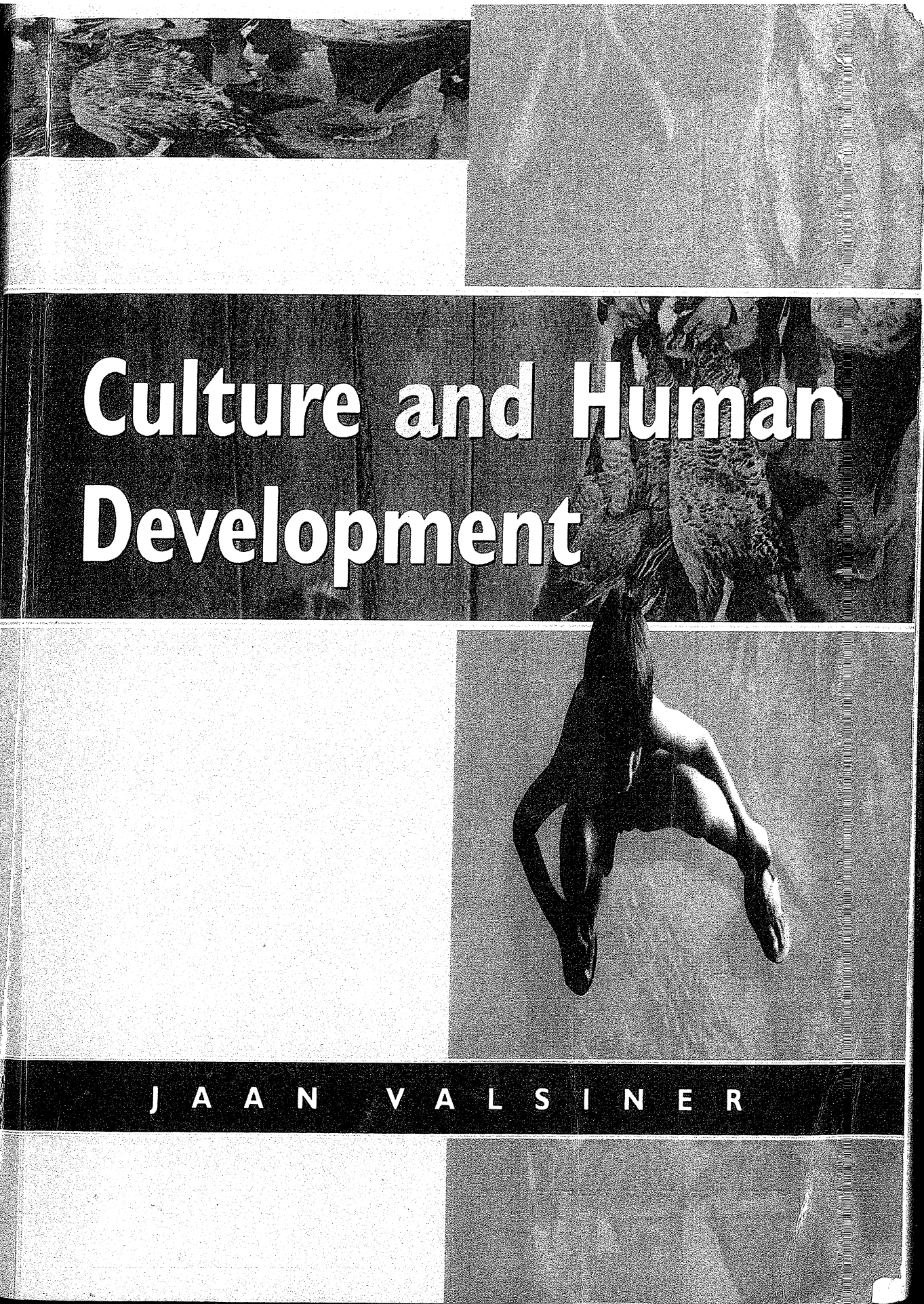




Culture and Human Development

J A A N V A L S I N E R

CULTURAL ORGANIZATION OF HUMAN LIFE ENVIRONMENTS

Human development is taking place under conditions that are *increasingly distanced* from the 'natural world'. What does that mean in terms of ordinary human thinking? A person wanders around in a street and sees a cat in a similar activity. The person not only perceives the presence, and movements, of that animal, but immediately begins to make sense of the event in terms of their own personal culture. The animal becomes referred to as 'this is a cat', which may become linked with personal affective tone of liking the cat ('what a kitty!'), or hating it ('that stray cat in the street!'). By personally relating to the cat, the meaning-making person simultaneously distances themselves (by way of the use of language within their mind) from the cat. The cat becomes an *object towards which the person can assume different agent positions* (for example, trying to approach the cat and stroke it; or threaten it from a distance so that it would run away). The semiotic reflexivity about the object allows for a wide range of such distant positions. The meaning constructed of the four-legged and be-whiskered miauwing being creates a multitude of scenarios for possible action. Human action results from taking one or another of such positions.

The focus of cultural psychology is precisely on the study of the ways in which human beings can distance their lives – both external activities and intra-psychological functions – from their 'natural' states. Increasing distancing from the natural world entails construction of cultural artefacts that mediate between the persons and their environments. *Cultural psychology deals with the analysis of forms and functions of such mediated distancing.*

Similarly to the cat example, human beings relate to any physical setting in which they are located, by way of *simultaneously being part of the setting and distancing themselves from it*. This is

the core of the function of culture within the human mind. One can claim that the tension between participation and non-participation in a here-and-now setting is a uniquely human cultural phenomenon. It makes aesthetic relation to the environment possible – human beings can reflect upon the world in terms of art, music and literature as aesthetic objects, rather than in terms of treating these as mere consumer objects.

THE SETTING AS A MEDIATED PLACE

Each human life context is organized culturally. This applies to any environment – including remote natural spots – where human beings happen to be. Even settings in the jungle, rain-forest or desert – as long as there is at least one human being who experiences those – are cultural. The experiencing person reconstructs the natural setting in terms of their personal-cultural experience. In nature, there exist no 'nice meadows' or 'mysterious forests', such designations are results of the externalization of human personal cultures. Such externalization produces the action valences for the producer – the 'dangerous-looking forest' is a semiotic mediator for its producer not to enter the setting, or do it with care. Likewise, the diurnal or seasonal changes of light of a setting becomes meaningful. The night can be viewed as 'dangerous' or 'erotic', the winter as 'dull', etc. Man-made neighbourhoods can become felt like 'safe' or 'dangerous' – without any basis for such designations other than the personal culture of the meaning-maker.

All architectural constructions are cultural distancing artefacts – from the simplest construction of a hut in a jungle, to skyscrapers in modern cities. Architectural places entail one or another form of making a distinction between the human and the natural worlds. Floors (in contrast to

ground), walls (in contrast to bush), windows, roofs etc. demarcate the human constructed space from the rest – the natural or 'other' cultural spaces. Layouts of towns create the urban/rural distinction. Within urban spaces, one can distinguish different settings by their meaningful functions. Thus, bars, restaurants, cafes, health clubs, churches, temples, cinemas, theatres, brothels, etc. are all constructed with some meaningful function intended on behalf of their planners. These functions are marked by specific signs embedded in the architectural design, and in interior and exterior temporary markers of its function. Such architectural spaces are holistic structures for living, within which specific cultural meanings are already pre-encoded.

A comparative-cultural example: what is a home? Human beings arrange their home habitats under many climatic and symbolic conditions. In Figure 7.1 we can see a variety of such examples.

In Figure 7.1A we can see a rather ordinary free-standing US middle-class home. It stands at a relative distance from its neighbours, and is assumed to guarantee the privacy of the owners relative to the neighbours. Yet it (at the same time) belongs to some 'neighbourhood community'. The separation of the home of the family from others is granted by the way the house is built, the unity with others is granted through creating concatenations of the homes as 'community'.

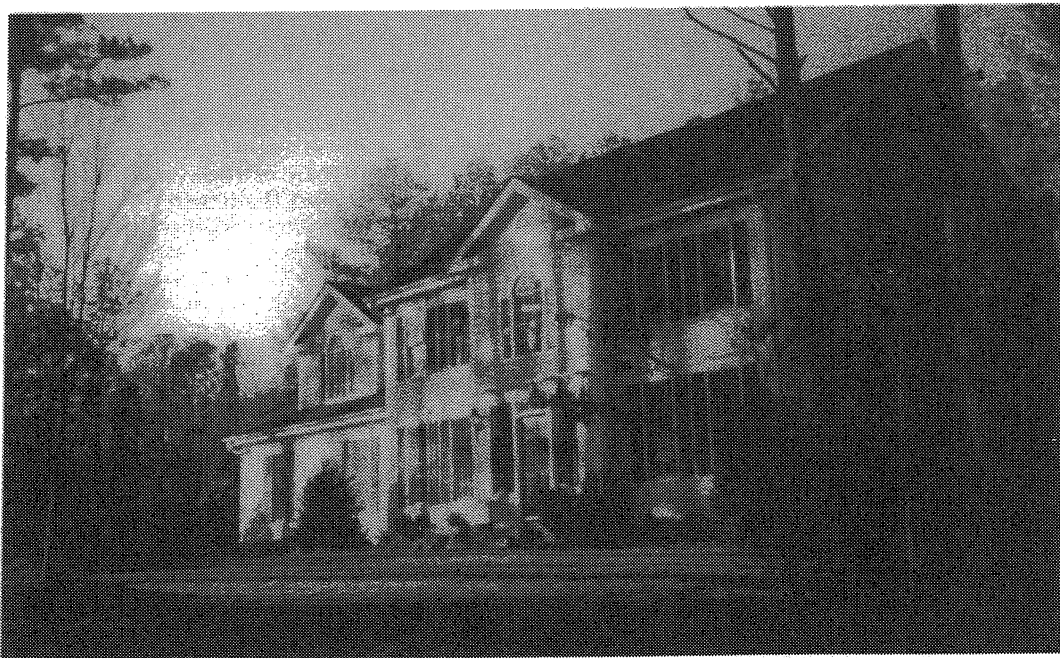


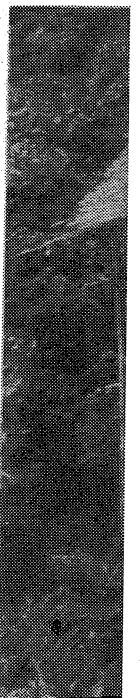
FIGURE 7.1 Examples of homes. A, an American suburban house

In Figure 7.1B we can see a rather large family house in England, which is inhabited by one owner (Mrs Windsor), her husband, and all the service people. It is both private (the grounds surrounding the house are heavily guarded against intruders), yet on special public occasions townspeople, tourists, and other hangers-around locate themselves in front of the house, trying to get a gratifying glimpse of its owners. At scheduled times, the owners may display themselves on the balcony, thus gratifying the public need. Yet the owners are very disappointed because highly technological photojournalists can penetrate the privacy of their home grounds at moments not designated by the owners. Again, the separation from others, and unification with them, are two parts of the same whole.

In Figure 7.1C we see a tree-house (*khaime*) of the Korowai of Irian Jaya (the Western part of the Island of New Guinea, incorporated into Indonesia). The tree-houses – built on traditional ancestral territories – can be up to 35 metres in height, regularly ranging between 8 and 12 metres from the ground. Both the stairs (ladder) and the beam of the entrance into the tree-house are smeared with animal fat to ensure its continuous welfare. The interior of the house is divided into a male and female part, with the fireplace as the centrally important centre place. The people sleep around the fire, which is used for cooking. Smaller domestic animals are



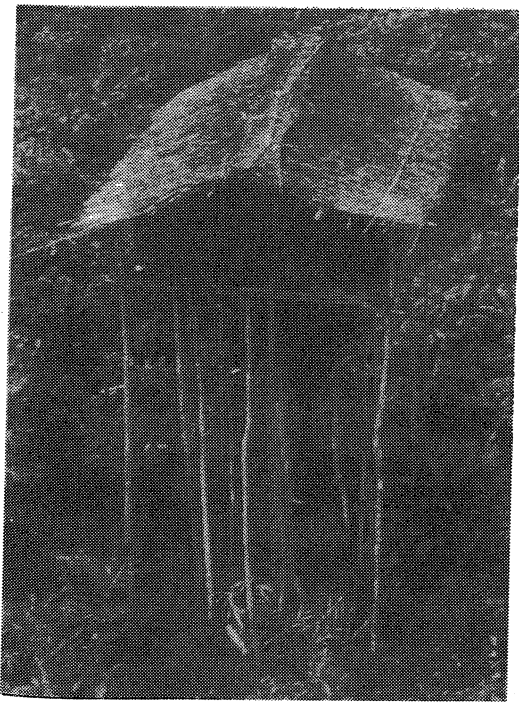
B, a British family house



C, a tree-house (photograph by permission from ...)



B, a British family home (Buckingham Palace) (photograph by Chris Gilbert)



C, a tree-house (khaim) of the Korowai of Irian Jaya (photograph by Johannes Veldhuizen 1986, reprinted by permission from Van Enk & De Vries, 1997, p. 21)

brought up to the tree-house to share the quarters – thus being safe from the predators of the rainforest. The Korowai live mostly on lowlands (around 1090 metres above sea level). Their material technology is mostly concentrated on production of weaponry (shields, bows, arrows, knives, spears), fishing and hunting technology, methods of raising pigs, and techniques of sago production. Since the 1980s, Korowai village settlements are also seen with houses – still built on poles, but only 1.5 metres high – where different ancestral families are forced to live at close quarters.

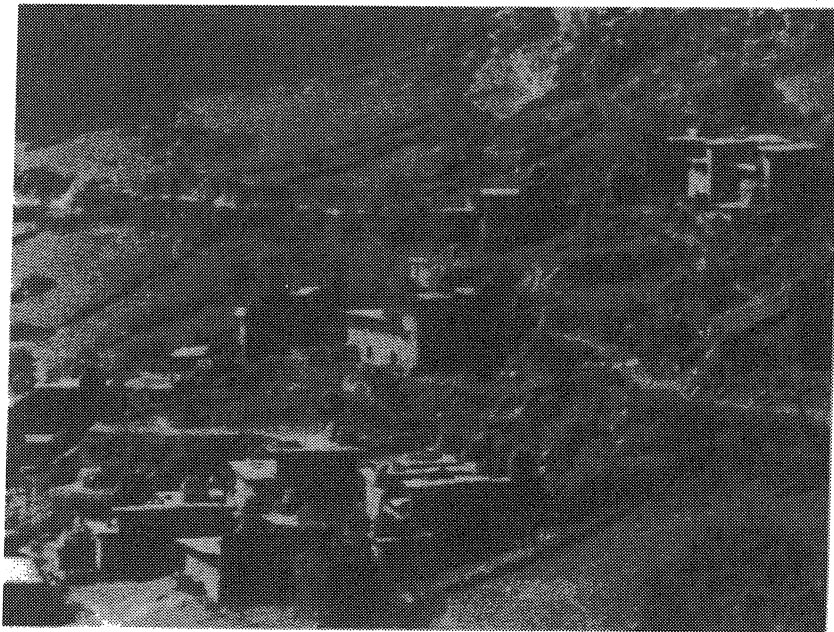
The nomadic lifestyle sets up demands upon the way home dwellings are constructed. In Figure 7.1D we have a typical nomadic home construction that proliferates all over Central Asia – a round tent, which can be moved from one location to another. The tent depicted here is typical of the Tibetan highlands.

Figure 7.1E shows a sedentary village in the Himalayan mountains. The people who inhabit the village practise polyandry (see Chapter 6). The house in the foreground has two entrances, which indicates that a polyandrous marriage located in it has ended in a divorce.

As we can see, what constitutes the home as a dwelling place for human beings varies immensely in its specific forms, yet the basic function of separation and unification of the



D, Tibetan tents (from Jones, 1996, p. 101, photograph by Lis Jones, reproduced by permission)



E, houses in a village in the Himalayas (from Levine, 1988, reproduced by permission of the University of Chicago Press)

persons and the natural (for example, tree-house) or sub-urban (US and UK family houses) are similar. Furthermore, such reconstruction of the environment goes beyond the case of the home: all man-made environment is semiotically mediated.

Human cultural construction of 'natural environments'

Sometimes such constructions imitate features of the natural environments. Carefully planned parks in cities are cultural artefacts that resemble their natural counterpart (forest), yet are not

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those. Similarly, fancy hotels may include as recreational areas architecturally re-constructed natural-looking waterfalls and pools – yet these are cultural reconstructions that operate as semiotic devices, rather than ‘real’ or ‘natural’ places. Human beings strive for ‘naturalness’ in their lives from a position of already being separated from it by culture. Each case of regaining ‘naturalness’ is itself a cultural construction.

Even human *uses* of purely natural – unaltered – environments turn the latter into culturally organized ones. A person wandering through a jungle turns it into a personal-culturally meaningful setting, by interpreting the perceived trees and bushes as ‘beautiful’ and the tropical heat as ‘tolerable’. The person remains culturally guided even when alone, and even if in the middle of a natural environment where no other person has traversed before. Cultural mediators allow human beings to *modulate* their psychological distance from the natural world, by turning the latter into a cultural one.

BASES FOR CULTURE IN PERSON-ENVIRONMENT RELATIONS

The non-cultural encounter of the organisms with their environments is based on immediate (non-modulated) relations between the environmental possibilities and the organism’s actions. This is captured by James J. Gibson’s concept of affordance, introduced by him in the 1960s and 1970s. Gibson, a student of Kurt Koffka, built his ideas upon his mentor, as well as on the work of Kurt Lewin, who both represented the Gestalt orientation in psychology.

The affordance concept

Gibson was not interested in issues of development, but in the question of how organisms pick up information from their immediate environments. He launched a campaign in favour of immediate perception, and rejected the notion of psychological (cognitive) construction. In this respect, the notion of distancing used in the present context would have been completely foreign and unacceptable for Gibson. Yet his elaboration of the notion of affordance can serve as a starting point for cultural constructionist psychology.

Gibson explained the notion of affordance in the following way:

Affordances are not simply phenomenal qualities of subjective experience... they are not simply the physical properties of things... Instead, they are ecological, in the sense that they are properties of the environment relative to an animal. (Reed and Jones, 1982, p. 404)

Gibson proceeded to elaborate different kinds of affordances. As he was not interested in issues of development, it was easy for him to concentrate upon the focus on how environmental textures relate with the species-specific action possibilities of a given species. Thus, automatized behavioural processes (for example, locomotion, catching a ball, swimming, flying and landing an airplane) could be linked with the affordances of the environmental conditions (surfaces on which locomotion takes place, properties of the liquid in which the organism swims, or of the air through which airplanes fly). The *organism here was assumed to be the adult, skilled organism of the given species*. The question of *how that organism came to be* in this adult form was of no relevance for Gibson’s use of the affordance concept. The organism would pick up information from the environment about what the latter affords, and act in a matching way. The organism is not trying to construct new ways of action, or trying to change the affordances of the environment.

It is clear that this perspective is not in line with cultural psychology of human development, where it is assumed that

- (a) organisms actively reconstruct their environments (that is, change the affordances) as they develop; and
- (b) that reconstruction is assisted by cultural (semiotic and instrumental) mediation.

Gibson’s focus on affordances pertains to the non-cultural and un-mediated encounters between the organisms and their species-specific environments. It can be viewed as a *basis for cultural construction* of mediated relations between human beings and their environments. Gibson himself was an opponent of constructionist perspectives in psychology, yet his ideas can serve as a fertile ground precisely for such perspectives.

INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION OF HUMAN ENVIRONMENTS

Many of the ways in which children of different ages are represented in psychology are part of a cultural framing of child development issues by social institutions. Different social institutions – governments, religious groups, local village communities etc. – have their goal-oriented ways of dealing with issues of human development.

Environmental organization

Social institutions can prescribe how specific environmental settings for human beings are to be set up. As we will see (in Chapter 13), the location of flagpoles and their relative height in front

of US school buildings indicates institutional marking of the boundary between the local community and generalized values that the school-building carries with its functions. Likewise, building environmental settings that emphasize distinction of the activities within the setting from those around them entails obligatory marking of the difference semiotically. Medieval cathedrals are oriented upwards towards the presumed living quarters of the deity, Hindu temples follow careful floor-plans and location with regard to symbolically appropriate directions.

Social discourse organization

Social institutions can prescribe how persons are expected to talk about different issues of human development. Depending upon those, a particular aspect of human development (for example, expectations for infants' 'toilet-training', or adolescents' 'rebelliousness') can be highlighted within the collective-cultural domain. Others may be made into 'taboo topics' for communication in public. As a result, the whole know-how about human development is selectively directed by collective-cultural meanings.

Institutions give direction and evaluative flavour to social discourse about some target object. This can be done in a number of ways. First, and most obviously, social discourse can be guided towards the *guidance of action* in some direction. For example, consider discourse about AIDS or street children in the First World societies. That discourse may lead to provision of funds for the needy, and to concrete action.

The second way of guiding social discourse is to create domains of the unspeakable, or *inhibit social discourse in some domains*. This could lead to de-focusing of the person's attention from the issue, which will thus escape from possible action upon it. For instance, the Western medical establishment would cover with silence discourse about fatal results due to medical mistakes. However, such purposeful silencing may result in a particular semiotic power of the unmentionable (see Ohnuki-Tierney, 1994). The notion of *zero signifiers* – signs based on absence of some (otherwise expected) semiotic material in the communicative message – is a vehicle for inhibiting explicit social discourse. Public talking about issues, topics and powerful personages (especially spirits of potentially dangerous kinds) can be de-emphasized through silence, changes of topics, 'hushing up' the less culturally skilful partner (for example, '... shh ... HE could hear us'). Inhibition of social discourse can also operate at the level of how not to talk publicly about some issues of life. As will be seen in Chapter 9, the US and Thai collective-cultural guidance of how one *should* talk about newborns (Thai: not praise the

baby, lest evil spirits get it; US: praise the dubious beauty of the newborn) exclude as unmentionable the opposite way (for Thai, the beauty of the newborn; for the US, his or her ugliness).

The third direction is most interesting – social discourse can be institutionally canalized so that some previously 'taboo' topics are not only turned into ones that can be spoken of, *but which must be* (potentially endlessly) *spoken about*. The crucial criterion here is elimination of connection between the hyperactive talking and acting – people actively talk 'empty' about issues considered relevant (for example, TV talk-shows), exhaust oneself by talking, and fail to plan any action. This latter method of social regulation of discourse is widely utilized in 'open societies' – which, by showing off openness to the public talk about sensitive matters, actually close these matters from the domain of action. Bureaucracies that govern social institutions are habitual generators of such foci of hypertalk.¹

Social institutions promote texts – myths, TV commercials, moralistic and educational stories – with a specific goal orientation in mind. The presentation of different aspects of human development is not merely re-presentational (this is how *X is*) but rather prescriptive-presentational (this is how *X should be*). This is particularly evident in advice given to parents for raising children, or to medical patients on different kinds of possible treatment.

Semiotic demand settings (SDSs)

Human psychological development proceeds through negotiation between the perception and action through the use of affordances, and the suggestions for feeling, thinking and acting that are proliferated through the collective culture. For human beings, the world of objects is available immediately under limits upon action (for example, the need to act under time pressure etc.), yet otherwise the environment is mediated through meanings.

We can talk about demands that the meaningful nature of a particular structured environment sets up for persons' feeling, thinking and acting. Let us call these settings *semiotic demand settings* (SDSs): human-made structures of everyday life settings where the properties of the objects are co-determined by perceptual-actional and cultural-meanings based possibilities and expectations (see Figure 7.2).

Any domain of human personal experience can become culturally guided by some socio-institutional focusing of the person's attention in one part of it. The suggested focus (see Figure 7.2A) can operate in two ways. First, it guides the person to reflect upon the focused experience in socially legitimized ways (Discourse Ways 1 and

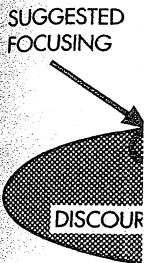
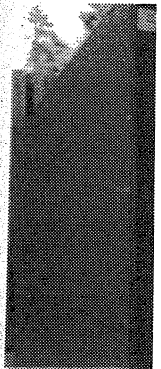


FIGURE 7.2 The (above) a general (below) an example of recycling centre



2). Note that the discourse way is situational, meaningful, and potentially different legitimized by different people and potentially

Secondly, the focus of interest of the experiential areas of experience for human in order to avoid complex or belated directed voluntary just a way of involuntary for or involuntary of psychological

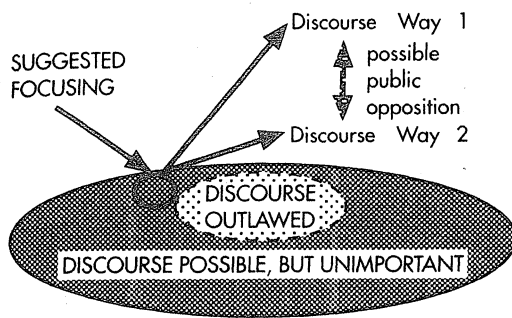
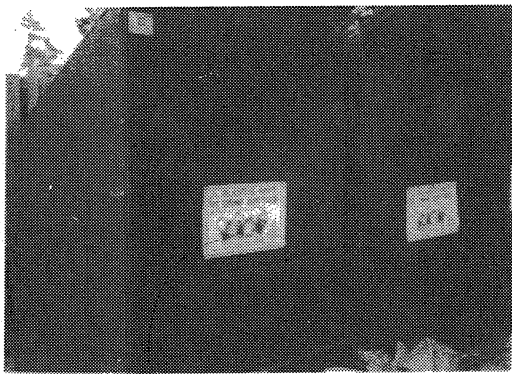


FIGURE 7.2 *The Semiotic Demand Setting*
(above) a general model of a semiotic demand setting;
(below) an example of a semiotic demand setting: a recycling centre



2). Note that there can be more than one legitimate discourse way (that is, different, at times oppositional, meaning systems can be used to make sense of the same focal experience). If these different legitimate discourse ways are utilized by different persons in communication, heated and potentially endless disputes may result.

Secondly, the suggested focusing upon one part of the experiential field can entail outlawing a focus of interest on the adjacent part. Different areas of experience are made culturally unavailable for human reflection. This may happen in order to avoid addressing issues that are too complex or believed to be 'dangerous' (culturally directed voluntary forgetting), or (more likely) is just a way of culturally directed oversight or involuntary forgetting. In both cases – voluntary or involuntary – this oversight or forgetting is of psychological value.

An example: from garbage 'dump' to 'recycling centre'

Figure 7.2B represents an example of a semiotic demand setting. In this photograph of standard US containers for garbage, we can observe the dramatic role socially suggested legitimization of discourse entails. These garbage containers are presented as a 'recycling centre' (rather than a mere garbage dump, which it functionally is for persons who bring their throw-aways to the place). The presentation of the containers as a 'recycling centre' has two demand implications. First, it requires the persons to act – by sorting their garbage into appropriate categories (of cardboard, white glass, green glass, brown glass, plastic, newspapers etc.). Secondly, it guides persons towards talking about such acting in terms of the value of the process of getting rid of the garbage in this newly meaningful way: the garbage will no longer be seen to contaminate some landfill somewhere, but will be 'put back to productive use' by the recycling plants (= social institutions which acquire the symbolic status of hero, fighting against humankind being overwhelmed by the garbage it produces). The persons who diligently sort their rubbish into prescribed cultural categories can (and are expected to) feel good about their participation in the shared institutional effort of 'saving nature'.

This legitimization of one way of talking, feeling and thinking about 'recycling' curiously outlaws some other aspects of the same issue (that is, the domain covered by 'discourse outlawed' in Figure 7.2A). The participants in the 'recycling effort' are *not allowed* to think about the fact that they actually give away their property (for example, old plastic containers, glass bottles, etc. still are the property of the owners who once bought these) to some recycling institution which, after recycling the materials, will earn profit from re-selling those. To talk of giving away one's garbage to the recycling system as an act of *donation of valuable property* (for example, similarly to fund-raising campaigns asking people to donate money for valuable causes) is outlawed. By cultural definition, 'garbage' has no value, and is to be thrown away (from the home grounds of the persons). Building upon that complex of meanings, the social institutions that set up 'recycling centres' create a semiotically re-focused way to look at the activity of recycling as a communally benevolent act.

At the personal-cultural level, the internalized models of how one acts with garbage are all around us. Any moment when we decide where to dispose of some no longer necessary object – a cigarette leftover, a used bus ticket, or wrappings of a just consumed delicious hamburger – we face our personal-cultural focusing (suggested by one

or other social institution over our whole lifetime) upon our experiential field, guided by legitimate ways of feeling about 'dirt' in our environments. Dog owners may carry newspapers with them while walking their dogs in a public park, so as to clean up what the dog produces and throw it into an appropriately designated (by city authorities) garbage container. Or we carry a piece of garbage with us for a considerable distance in search of a bin for it and ignore the fact that on our way we encounter numerous objects of similar kind, just thrown out on the street.

The issue of conflict between internalized personal-cultural constructions of one's relations to garbage emerges particularly vividly when persons from one society are transposed to the context of another. Tourism (as a case of temporary migration of an inherently ambivalent kind, see below) provides nice examples of such tensions. Thus, an account by a Belgian female tourist travelling in China reveals a serious affective turbulence:

The garbage [created by the traveling tourists] is gathered together and put in a plastic bag that hangs on Emilie's backpack. Today she is the garbage woman. Until now we have always carefully carried the inflammable [*sic*] waste, mainly tins, to a following city. Paper, plastic, sanitary towels, and the like are burnt. Miriam describes the horrible waste problem that Nepal causes. A large number of hikers traverse through the country on foot or by bike. On their way they mostly bury their garbage. This damages the subsoil in great degree and on a large scale. The Chinese are not conscious about the environment either in the disposal of waste. I have never understood the indifference with which *they dump waste in tourist places or in the middle of nature*. Probably that has to do with something in me that comes from my scout upbringing. When I traveled for the first time through China by train, I mindfully kept my litter the whole day. Fellow-travelers just thoughtlessly threw everything on the ground. I felt extremely indignant. When the team of cleaners of the train came to clean up, I proudly handed over to them my plastic bag of garbage. *No reaction. Shortly after, I saw them push open a window and throw everything outside.* (Shi-xu, 1995, p. 326; original emphasis).

This example complements the socio-institutionally suggested focus on garbage (and its disposal). The women depicted travelling as a Western tourist group are involved in chatting about the 'deplorable practices' of the others, and acting in ways so as to feel good about themselves as defenders of their internalized standards of 'care for the environment'. The institutionally suggested narratives of how to handle 'the garbage' become transformed into personal-cultural action, talking, feeling and thinking directions.

How can persons survive in a pointedly suggested social universe?

The co-constructural nature of human development creates a buffer against the various social suggestions. Furthermore, the heterogeneity of institutional goal orientations within the 'nested systems' (in Bronfenbrenner's terms, see below) does not allow any one single 'voice' to gain full dominance. Certainly there is an effort by social institutions to overtake the heterogeneity and monopolize the suggestions.

The difference of the personal culture from the socially suggested demands of the collective-cultural world allows for personal psychological survival under intense suggestions. Persons can counteract, reject, or neutralize incoming social suggestions. They can ignore the given semiotic demand setting. Or they can feel outside of its influence, while formally fulfilling the expectations. It is the heterogeneity of the multiple contexts that allows for such flexibility.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's systemic model

How is the multiplicity of contexts for human development organized? Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) has introduced a multi-level system of description of how persons relate with their social contexts. His 'nested systems' model includes four mutually inclusive systems: *micro-, meso-, exo- and macrosystems*

Microsystem

A microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22). The crucial point here is the focus on experiencing – the person experiences his or her particular immediate life context in personal terms. If that context is that of home and the person is at peace with his or her home context, that experiencing can attain a positive, trustful feeling tone. But it can also take the form of a 'war landscape' (to paraphrase Kurt Lewin's initial point of his field theory), in which case the feeling tone of the experiencing person in the home context can be insecure, ambivalent, or outrightly negative. The external specifics of the environment may be the same – exactly the same physical home environment and interactive rituals with other family members can acquire feeling tones for the experiencing child that range from one extreme to another. The developing child may feel (in his or her terms) 'mother's control' – or 'mother's care' – perceived in the mother's suggestions to dress warmer while going out. The experiencing person makes their

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