

Mind the Border!

Introduction to the Special Issue

GIUSEPPINA MARSICO
University of Salerno, Italy

The Special Issue is aimed at exploring from the theoretical and empirical points of view the concept of border in contemporary cultural psychology. Borders is an innovative multidisciplinary theoretical construct that is raising interest in human and social sciences. Different psycho-social processes can be explored and understood focusing on what happens on the border. From the perspective of cultural psychology, borders are the outcome of culturally organized processes which are not fixed, but based on a continuous organization and reorganization of the I-Other-World relationships. Borders are not rigid and durable delimitations, but they are processes of semiotic configuration that make possible human actions in a given environment.

The aim of the Special Issue is to explore the concept of border in contemporary cultural psychology from both the theoretical and the empirical point of view. This is one of the advanced outcomes of the first international Summer School held in Salerno in 2014 (University of Salerno, 7th-11th July), specifically focused on the topic of borders. This international event guided advanced students and early-stage researchers in the discovery the heuristic power of the border's notion, with the scaffolding of experienced and leading international scholars. In particular, the learning objectives were the acquisition of theoretical knowledge about the concept of border and its multidisciplinary development, the application of the concept of border in human and social sciences and the capability of developing individual research projects on borders.

BORDERS IN THE WORLD AND BORDERS IN THE HEAD

Borders is an innovative multidisciplinary theoretical construct that is raising interest in human and social sciences. Different psycho-social processes can be explored and understood focusing on what happens on the border.

Usually, a border is understood as something in between two or more sites. In this sense, the border evokes the idea of differences and difficulties in interaction. Even if the border implies the idea of separation, it is also "the point of contact" of different settings (Marsico, 2013).

In the domains of human and social sciences, borders are constructed artifacts that are externalized into the wider world to culturally shape and regulate human psychological functioning in relation to the environment. A person or a group of people construct borders to articulate, differentiate, or hierarchically integrate their relationship with the environment (Marsico, Cabell, Valsiner & Kharlamov, 2013). The environment, in this sense, includes the self, other individuals, a group of people (e.g. society), the physical environment, etc. Therefore, a person or a group construct and impose borders on the world to make their relationship with themselves, with others, and with the surrounding less ambiguous.

Meaning-making, distinction-making, and value-adding are the three processes for an individual construction of borders in mind and in society. Once these borders are established, those who have made them distinct and added-value to them, then engage in the process of “border control”, or management, negotiation, and navigation of the meaningful, distinct, value-able border. Conversely, the borders that are constructed and imposed on the wider world engage in a process of regulating individual minds and larger societies—in fact they become naturalized givens in the wider world and regulate the same people that constructed them.

It seems that we desperately need to draw borders, for instance, by labeling things, categorizing objects and making distinctions between them (both concrete and abstract objects). As Varzi (2011, 2013) pointed out, we, as human beings, must define and distinguish the world around us in order to understand it- otherwise we would get lost. In other words, by defining the world and distinguishing objects from each other, we create an understanding of the world, but at the same we are creating partitions within the whole. As a consequence, new parts-whole dynamics emerge with all the psychological implications in regulating our relationship in this new set of circumstances (Marsico & Varzi, 2015). In addition the three processes of border construction (meaning-making, distinction-making, and value-adding) occur on the basis of the understanding of the human condition we have at that specific moment. All these issues make the borders construction and border regulation a very interesting psychological phenomenon to investigate.

THE THEORETICAL ASPECT OF THE BORDER IN CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

From the perspective of cultural psychology, borders are the outcome of culturally organized processes which are not fixed, but based on a continuous organization and reorganization of the I-Other-World relationship (Simão, 2012).

Borders are in fact not rigid and durable delimitations, but they are processes of semiotic configuration that make possible human actions in a given environment. The capability to create borders is strictly connected with the semiotic ability to produce “devices” for defining contextual occurrences (De Luca Picione & Freda, 2015).

As Valsiner pointed out (1999, 2014), cultural psychology contributes to the reflection on the borders in human lives as cultural constructed objects. They stop and enable movement, regulate power relations, create new horizons for the human actions, provide a structure for the mind. Borders act through a sign-making process and they are temporary structures for the purpose of hierarchical organization of acting, behaving, feeling and thinking.

But what is the “nature of the borders?” From a very abstract and philosophical standpoint¹ we can adopt a realist or a constructivist perspective in order to decide on their nature. One of

¹ I am referring here to *Mereotopology*, which is a part of contemporary philosophy that provides tools for the ontological analysis of formal structures of parts and whole (Smith, 1997; Smith and Varzi, 2000; Varzi, 1997, 1998). Mereotopology faces, from an ontological point of view, the part-whole issue and, therefore, the question of the relationship between a border and the thing it bounds. Mereotopology rises from the ambitious attempt to provide a unified framework of the way we represent space, the objects that occupy it and the relationships between them. It consists of a combination of *topology* - the discipline which deals with the qualitative aspects of geometric structures- and the “theory of parts and the whole” (or *mereology*), whose Aristotelian roots have been systematized by Brentano (1981).

the main distinctions would be whether borders are natural or artificial. At this point, we can introduce a first conceptual differentiation between *bona fide* borders based on some objective discontinuity or qualitative heterogeneity and *fiat* borders which are the result of conventional demarcations, of political, social and administrative agreements, defining, as in the case of geo-political borders, where a territory starts and ends (Smith, 1997; Smith & Varzi, 2000; Varzi, 1997). In other terms, *bona fide* are natural borders– and *fiat* – are human established limits. Although artificially produced by human action, the power of the *fiat* borders is not less binding than a natural border and they have practical effects in the management of our daily lives. Sufficient is to think to all the walls and fences we build up in our ordinary lives (i.e. urban environment) that indicate the property of this or that owner or, at geopolitical level, the invisible and imaginary line into the Mediterranean sea that divides North-African coasts from Europe and from which derive practical and sometimes dramatic consequences, as in the recent cases of the massive flux of migration (Marsico, Cabell, Valsiner & Kharlamov, 2013).

This aspect assumes a crucial role in cultural psychology's perspective. In fact the arbitrariness of the borders allow us to negotiate, re-organize, and ultimately modify them. What is terrifically important to investigate from a psychological point of view is, then, not only the borders *per se* but the process of border crossing and the human vicissitudes that take place on those borders (Marsico, 2013). Equally important from the theoretical point of view is the triadic nature of the borders processes. They happen in the present time that are the inevitable border between past and future. So, definitively, borders construction and borders regulation are driven by the imagery of the future.

If psychology as science starts looking at borders, it has to presume inherent ambivalence of the border zone in between the world “where we are” and the world “out there” (a not-yet region). After all, psychological phenomena exist at the border of the person and the environment, for this reason psychology is intrinsically a science “in-between”. As the reader will see in the next pages, the peculiar nature of psychology as a science of human liminal constructions will be well presented in the articles of this special issues.

A LOOK AT THE CONTRIBUTIONS

As the Special Issue's title underlies, we intend to focus on the pervasive and crucial role of the borders in understanding human actions. The special issue has managed to be interdisciplinary in the discussions of the border notion promoting an enrichment for different areas of psychology and other neighbor disciplines. Thus, on the pages of the journal one can find the interplay between different fields of research in contemporary psychology and the efforts to explain the notion of the border in its interfacing between art and sciences (see Lorderlo), from a clinical point of view (see Nassar), in between performing arts and cultural psychology (see Morais & Silva Guimarães), and in relation to discourse analysis (see Hermansen). Two other papers (see Carrè and Santana da Silva) complement and expand, in a wider theoretical perspective, the ideas discussed by the authors. The final product shows the inherent complexity of border's notion, that requires an explicit interdisciplinary treatment. Cultural psychology here, plays a crucial role not only in promoting the linkages between

different but interwoven scientific discourses, but also in supporting the synthesis of new ideas, feeding new research practices towards a further development of the field.

References

- Brentano, F. (1981). *Philosophical investigations on space, time and the continuum*. London, England: Croom Helm.
- De Luca Picione R. & Freda M.F. (2015). Borders and modal articulations. Semiotic constructs of sensemaking processes enabling a fecund dialogue between Cultural Psychology and Clinical Psychology, *Integrative Psychology and Behavioral Science*, 10.1007/s12124-015-9318-2.
- Marsico, G. (2013). *Moving Between the Social Spaces: Conditions for Boundaries Crossing*. In G. Marsico, K. Komatsu, and A. Iannaccone (Eds.) *Crossing Boundaries. Intercontextual dynamics between Family and School*. Charlotte, N.C. USA.: Information Age Publishing (pp. 361-374).
- Marsico G., Cabell K. R., Valsiner J. & Kharlamov, N.A. (2013). *Interobjectivity as a Border: The fluid dynamics of "Betweenness"*. In G. Sammut, P. Daanen, and F. Moghaddam (Eds.) *Understanding the Self and Others: Explorations in intersubjectivity and interobjectivity* (pp. 51-65). London: Routledge.
- Marsico, G. & Varzi, A. (2015). *Psychological and Social Borders: Regulating Relationships*. In J., Valsiner, G., Marsico, N. Chaudhary, T., Sato, V., Dazzani, (Eds). (2016). *Psychology as a Science of Human Being: The Yokohama Manifesto*, *Annals of Theoretical Psychology*, 13, (pp. 327-335), Geneve, Switzerland: Springer.
- Simão, L. M. (2012). The Other in the Self: A triadic unit. In J. Valsiner (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Culture and Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 403-420.
- Smith, B. (1997). Boundaries: An essay in mereotopology. In L. H. Hahn (Ed.), *The philosophy of Roderick Chisholm* (pp. 534-561). Chicago, IL: Open Court.
- Smith, B., & Varzi, A. (2000). Fiat and bona fide Boundaries. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 60, 401-420.
- Valsiner, J. (1999). I create you to control me: A glimpse into basic processes of semiotic mediation. *Human Development*, 42, 26-30.
- Valsiner, J. (2014). *An Invitation to Cultural Psychology*. London: Sage.
- Varzi, A. (1997). Boundaries, continuity, and contact. *Noûs*, 31, 26-58.
- Varzi, A. (1998). Basic problems of mereotopology. In N. Guarino (Ed.), *Formal ontology in information systems* (pp. 29-38). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: IOS Press.
- Varzi, A. (2011). Boundaries, Conventions, and Realism. In J. K. Campbell, M. O'Rourke, and M. H. Slater (eds.), *Carving Nature at Its Joints: Natural Kinds in Metaphysics and Science*, Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Varzi A.C. (2013), Boundary. In E. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*, Winter 2013 Edition.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Giuseppina Marsico is Assistant Professor of Development and Educational Psychology at the Department of Human, Philosophic and Education Sciences (DISUFF), at the University of Salerno (Italy) and Adjunct Professor at Ph.D Programme in Psychology, Federal University of Bahia, Salvador, Brazil. She is a 15 years experienced researcher, with a proven international research network. Her research track includes studies on developmental risk at school, youth

deviance, school-family communication, boundaries and contexts. She is Editor in-chief of the Book Series *Cultural Psychology of Education* (Springer), Editor of *Annals Of Cultural Psychology: Exploring the Frontiers of Mind and Society* (InfoAge Publishing, N.C., USA), Associate Editor of *Cultural & Psychology* Journal (Sage) and member of the editorial board of several international academic journals (i.e. *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science*, IPBS; Springer). She also edited the books *Crossing Boundaries. Intercontextual dynamics between Family and School* (Information Age Publishing); *Educational contexts and borders through a cultural lens – Looking inside. Viewing outside* and *Jerome S. Bruner beyond 100. Cultivating possibilities* (Springer). Email: gmarsico@unisa.it, pina.marsico@gmail.com