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Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

Original citation:

Zittoun, Tania and Gillespie, Alex (2015) *Internalization: how culture becomes mind*. [Culture & Psychology](#), 21 (4). pp. 477-491. ISSN 1354-067X

DOI: [10.1177/1354067X15615809](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X15615809)

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This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/65040/>

Available in LSE Research Online: January 2016

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Internalization: How culture becomes mind

Tania Zittoun and Alex Gillespie

Abstract

Internalization, the process by which culture becomes mind, is a core concept in cultural psychology. However, since the 1990s it has also been the source of debate. Critiques have focused on the underlying metaphor of internal-external as problematic, and it has been proposed to rename this process appropriation, a term that focuses attention more on behavior and less on psychological processes. The present article reviews the debate and introduces the recent concepts of position exchange and symbolic resources. Position exchange focuses on the societal side of culture, on the way in which social situations shape people's experiences. Symbolic resources focuses on culture in terms of heterogeneous elements, books, films and so on, which also shape people's experiences. The key idea common to both concepts is that people move through culture, both physically and psychologically, that culture shapes a series of experiences across the lifecourse, and that these experiences 'layer up' within individuals, forming a sedimentation of culture within individuals. In so far as culture is heterogeneous and fragmented, so the sedimented layers of experience will also be heterogeneous and fragmented, thus creating the tensions that underlie the psychological dynamics of mind.

Keywords: internalization, symbolic resources, position exchange, culture, mind

Internalization: How culture becomes mind

When *Culture & Psychology* was established in 1995 (Valsiner, 1995), a key debate in the field was between internalization and appropriation. Should culture be conceptualized as something that moves into the individual, constituting their psychological life? Or should culture be conceptualized as a practice, something that one becomes skilled in? A second debate came about when internalization started to appear as a passive process, not accounting for psychological development and the emergence of novelty. We revisit these debates with the benefit of 20 years hindsight. After outlining the terms of these debates, we then show how the recent concepts of symbolic resources and position exchange can enrich our understanding of internalization. We conclude by presenting an integrative model that moves beyond individual-culture relations, by including a consideration of how cultural elements structure psychological experience, a consideration of the wider societal structure that shapes individual experience, and a lifecourse perspective that looks at internalization and appropriation as part of development across the lifecourse.

The internalization debates

The concept of internalization became popular through the 1978 publication of Vygotsky's work *Mind in Society* edited and translated by Michael Cole and colleagues. In that work, Vygotsky and his editors describe the process of internalization in terms of three transformations:

(a) An operation that initially represents an external activity is reconstructed internally. Of particular importance to the development of higher mental processes is the transformation of sign-using activity, the history and characteristics of which are illustrated by the development of practical intelligence, voluntary attention, and memory.

(b) An interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one. Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice; first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (*interpsychological*), and then inside the child (*intrapsychological*) [...]

(c) The internalization of cultural forms of behavior involves the reconstruction of psychological activity on the basis of sign operations. [...] The internalization of socially rooted and historically developed activities is the distinguishing feature of human psychology, the basis of the qualitative leap from animal to human psychology. As yet, the barest outline of this process is known. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57-58).

According to this account, operations, social interactions and culture are internalized. However, how these originally external phenomena are actually internalized remains unclear. Indeed, in the 1990s it was still the case that "the barest outline of this process is known." This lack of clarity fostered debate. After the collapse of communism in 1991 and coinciding with new translations (i.e., *Thought and language* in 1986 (Vygotsky, 1986), and the first volumes of the collected works) the process of internalization received critical scrutiny (van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2011). The ensuing debate also took place as cultural psychology was expanding as a field (Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996; Valsiner, 1987; Wertsch, 1991), in dialogue with other disciplines (such as anthropology, semiotics and cognitive sciences) and the translation of other soviet psychologists, with the result being an emergence of sub-groups within the field, such as, cultural-historical activity theory, approaches centered on community of practices, distributed cognition, and more semiotic approaches.

The initial critique was that internalization was very general and “not sufficient for elaborated theoretical use, nor is it helpful in deriving empirical research methodologies” (Lawrence & Valsiner, 1993, p. 191). This generality gave way to two more specific problems and debates: First, does it accurately conceptualize interactions between mind and culture? And second, does it sufficiently explain how new ideas emerge, how development comes to be, and how people contribute to social change?

1) Internalization vs appropriation: The inside-outside fallacy

The first debate centered on the spatial metaphor implied by the notion of internalization (Wertsch 1993), namely, the sharp metaphorical distinction between that which is external to the individual and that which is internal to the individual (Lakoff & Johnson, 1982). The problem is that the concept traverses the major tensions in psychology, across the divide between mind and matter, and across the divide between the individual and society. To raise the question of how culture moves from the outside to the inside potentially separates mind from the world, reifying it. Thus there was a concern that the concept of internalization would lead cultural psychologists backward, into philosophical debates about the ontological status of mind. Accordingly, Rogoff proposed replacing the concept of internalization with that of “appropriation”:

I use the term "participatory appropriation" (or simply "appropriation") to refer to the process by which individuals transform their understanding of and responsibility for activities through their own participation. [...] The basic idea of appropriation is that, through participation, people change and in the process become prepared to engage in subsequent similar activities. By engaging in an activity, participating in its meaning, people necessarily make ongoing contributions (whether in concrete actions or in stretching to understand the actions and ideas of others). [...] Rather than viewing the process as one of internalization in which something static is taken across a boundary from the external to the internal, I see children's active participation itself as being the process by which they gain facility in an activity. (Rogoff, 1995)

The concept appropriation bypasses the inside/outside metaphor, emphasizing the activity of the person within their situated social context. This activity within a context is observable and unproblematic. Moreover, in the progressive mastery of an activity one can study how the individual becomes a competent cultural actor; in short, no claims about internalizing culture are necessary.

The problem with Rogoff's (1995) argument is that, first, it is based on a restrictive understanding of Vygotsky, and second, it eliminates *psychological* development. This approach turns an epistemological principle (i.e., development is socially situated and mediated and thus the mind is inherently social) into an ontological one, namely, that the “mind” either does not exist or is not relevant. Put somewhat bluntly, this approach seems to resolve the internal/external tension by focusing exclusively on one side of the debate (i.e., the external). This approach avoids confronting the philosophical issue of how the mind is related to the world, but, in the process it overlooks the empirical phenomenon of mind.

Valsiner and Lawrence (1997) resisted dissolving the psychological into the concept of participation, arguing for a semiotic understanding of internalization; it is not things from the world that come into the mind, but meanings, that is, making sense of the world. Meanings guided by social interactions, cultural artifacts and institutions can be reconstructed as meanings in the mind. Internalization becomes a socially guided, culturally enabled psychological process. Understanding internalization as a semiotic dynamic reveals how the person can, in turn, bring new meanings to the world, namely, by the symmetric process of externalization.

Internalization and externalization involve reciprocal cyclical processes by which the person operates on semiotic material, the signs that stand for the objects and events within the meanings the collective-culture constructs and uses to represent its realities. By 'internalization', we understand the process by which meanings that are held out for the individual by social structures and social others are brought over into the individual's thinking. This process of bringing over meanings is bi-directional (from outer to inner world, and back), and constructive. What originally had collective-cultural meaning in the inter-personal (or inter-mental) domain, under the guidance of socially shared interpretations of reality becomes intra-personal (intra-mental) (Lawrence & Valsiner 1993). This transposition occurs during social interactions, for example, when two persons are engaged in dyadic problem solving, during explicitly teaching episode, or implicitly while persons engage in the normal activities of life. The reciprocal process of 'externalization' connotes activities in the injection back into the social environment of material that once was social in character and had become personal. (Lawrence & Valsiner 1997, p. 95)

Focusing the debate upon meaning and externalization was a significant contribution. However, this redefinition of internalization as bidirectional semiotic process still does not account for the fact that internalization might lead to the psychological creation of authentic new ideas. For this, a more elaborated model needs to be developed – internalization is not only a circulation, it is also construction and integration.

2) Internalization as reproduction vs. development

This second debate was addressed by Aaro Toomela (1996) in the pages of *Culture & Psychology*. After reviewing the internalization debate, Toomela argued that the co-construction argument of Lawrence and Valsiner (1993) "does not explain why it is necessary for human to develop in the *socio-cultural* environment; and how a developmental transformation of mind takes place" (Toomela, 1996, p. 286). His starting working definition was:

Internalization is a process whereby two different mechanisms of information processing, non-verbal ('sensory') thinking and conventional language, that have been differentiated from the 'natural' processes in the course of development become united within a new mental structure. The result of internalization is the development of semiotically mediated, 'cultural' mental operations. (Toomela, 1996, p. 286, emphasis original).

What is interesting about Toomela's conceptualization of internalization is that it entails the combination of two streams, the sensory and the linguistic, in the emergence of new mental structures. The paper then develops the notions of structure (made of elements in a dynamic relation), dynamic development, related to it, natural vs cultural processes, and semiotic mediation, before analytically characterizing internalization in terms of the following properties:

- (1) Internalization is a structural change. That is to say, internalization is a process whereby elements that are not connected, or even are not differentiated from the lower-order structures at the beginning of the development, will be united within a more complex structure.
- (2) Elements that create a new structure are an environment and a developing person [...] For the development of internalization, a person must possess innate abilities that allow perception of the environment; and the environment must be social.
- (3) The social nature of the developmental environment is necessary for the differentiation of symbolic operations from other kinds of relationships between objects and persons. The

differentiation leads to the acquisition of two different mechanisms for processing the same information.

- (4) The result of the internalization is a semiotically mediated mental process. Semiotically mediated process is a specific kind of mental structure where (sensory) information is processed by two different but structurally connected mechanisms, that of non-verbal thinking and that of symbolic operations. With the construction of such new structures – ‘cultural’ processes – a qualitative new type of thinking operations is acquired. It becomes possible intra-individually to create novel information and go beyond directly observable facts which can be perceived through a sensory system. (Toomela, 1996, pp. 297-298)

Toomela’s dynamic, structural, semiotic understanding of internalization allows for more fine grained analysis of human development. It goes far beyond the inside/outside fallacy, and deepens the semiotic analysis of internalization by adding a structural basis, anchorage in the organization of the social environment, and a differentiation within the psychological processes involved. Through these additions, Toomela created a heuristic notion that accounts for internalization as developmental process.

Within the past twenty years, the field of cultural psychology split. The concept of internalization as appropriation was accepted by many authors and researchers; meanwhile, others moved toward a more meaning-based notion on internalization, and some developed directions corresponding to Toomela’s intuitions. For instance, studies in developmental psychology began exploring various aspects of the semiotic nature of the development of mind, the various forms of cultural processes involved, or the dynamics modalities of development, yet depending on sociocultural structures (Lyra, 2007; Moro & Rodriguez, 1998; Reddy, 2008; Rodriguez 2007). In what follows, we show how our work further contributes to the notion of internalization by building on Toomela’s propositions.

Position exchange: Experiences guided by social situations

One recent development that contributes to the internalization/appropriation debate is Position Exchange Theory (Gillespie, 2006, 2012; Martin & Gillespie, 2010). This is a neo-Meadian theory of how people ‘internalize’ the perspectives of others so as to build up the dialogicality of the mind. Much research has shown that the self comprises a wide variety of voices (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010), and that the dynamics of the self, especially the stream of consciousness, is characterized by the dialogical tensions between these voices (Gillespie, 2005). However, the question of how the voices of significant others, and the wider society, ‘get inside’ the psychological functioning of the individual remains unresolved. The idea of position exchange is an attempt to answer this question.

Position exchange begins with the idea that society both at a macro level and at a more micro institutional level, and even the level of routine practices, comprises numerous differentiated social positions. A social position is like a role, but, it puts the emphasis on the social structuring of the situation to drive both thought and action. For example, the social position of being an employer, a parent, or a teaching entails a configuration of social demands, constraints, affordances, expectations and experiences that shape the perspective of the person occupying the social position. Social positions can also be at a more abstract level, for example, being in power, being in an ingroup, being in poverty, being a minority, or being discriminated against. Again, occupying such social positions cultivates within the individual a distinctive psychological perspective.

The contribution of position exchange is to emphasize the fact that people routinely move between social positions. Children become parents, employees become employers, students become

teachers, and unemployed become employed. These movements can also reverse: people who are employed can become unemployed, sometimes teachers have to learn, and so on. These exchanges of social position also occur at a micro level, in the exchanges between helping and being helped, giving and getting, questioning and answering, talking and listening, apologizing and forgiving and so on. The interesting thing about these exchanges of social position is that it provides a mechanism for the layering up of experiences within the individual in such a way as to create the potential for the dialogicality of mind. For example, the perspective cultivated while being a child (e.g., "I'll never be like my parents") contrasts with perspective cultivated while being a parent (e.g., demands, responsibilities and safety concerns). Research has shown how the move from the social position of not having children to having children creates tensions due to the layering up of different experiences, goals and orientations (Smith, 1999). Equally, research has shown how doctors who become patients also have a clash of perspectives, in this case between needing to preserve some emotional distance from patients and potentially having too much empathy and psychological involvement (Edelstein & Baider, 1982). The key point of position exchange is that the doctor internalizes the perspective of patients most directly by being a patient.

The contribution of position exchange to the internalization debate is to remind us of the importance of the fact that people regularly move between social positions. This is important because, as much social psychology shows us, people's psychological orientation, their perspective, is largely determined by their social position, that is, the power of the social situation (Ross & Nisbett, 1999). Accordingly, as people move between social positions they are in effect moving between psychological orientations. But, while people can move absolutely out of one social situation and into another, they cannot move so cleanly between the associated psychological orientations. That is to say movement between social positions creates a layering up of perspectives within the individual, and it is this layering up that we can talk about the social structure of society, or even the voices of society, being internalized.

Symbolic resources: Experiences guided by cultural artifacts

Another contribution to the internalization debate was proposed with the concept of symbolic resource (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2010; Hale, 2008; Hale & de Abreu, 2010; Muller Mirza, Grossen, de Diesbach-Dolder, & Nicollin, 2014; Zittoun, 2006a, 2007, 2013; Zittoun et al., 2003). Symbolic resources refer to complex semiotic artifacts, such as books, films or songs, used in relation to something that exceeds their intended meaning. When used as symbolic resources, they "can thus offer complex forms of semiotic mediation intended to facilitate the apprehension of new events and thoughts" (Zittoun, 2006a, p. 61). This concept reveals the diverse forms of sociocultural guidance, and also, emphasizes the possibility for the emergence of new experiences on the basis of what is internalized.

The concept was developed to account for the fact that signs to be internalized rarely appear in isolation - one does not only internalize a single sign such as that which allows us to recognize an apple or to add two numbers. People mostly encounter signs in more complex semiotic configurations. In effect, people often say that an important experience or guide in their lives was a book or a song that changed their lives; also, people can re-see a movie or re-experience a film or song in their material absence, that is to say, through their mind's eyes or ears. This suggests that these cultural artefacts have been, so some extent, internalized. So, how can we account for this?

Cultural elements such as books, films or songs have a relatively stable form, because of their boundary or frame, and their material or institutional support. They are made of a complex semiotic configuration of different modalities (sound-based, words, colors) and they demand an imaginary

experience. A cultural experience is thus a semiotically guided imaginary experience – such as watching a film or reading a novel. The semiotic guidance comes from the outside (the colored dots moving on a screen combined with the soundtrack) yet the experience itself necessarily comes from within the person: a film is striking, or scary, or romantic, because the viewer mobilizes his or her personal memories of events or situations similar to these depicted in the construction of a new experience, an imaginary experience of what may happen and the associated embodied emotions (Vygotsky, 1971; Zittoun, 2006b).

Such culturally guided experiences are thus orchestrated from outside the person, but the experiences are inner psychological phenomena. These experiences can leave a strong impression, can be repeated, and eventually become personal. People may refer to a movie situation or a book character, or think back of a song, to make sense of a daily situation. These culturally guided imaginary experiences become, in short, real reference points in the lives of people. In other words, these are now part of one's personal culture, and can be used as psychological tools – that is, as symbolic resources.

What has been internalized? One cannot say that one has internalized a book or a film; rather, what has been internalized, is the pattern of experience guided by a semiotic configuration; only then, a similar experience can be guided from within (in addition, cultural experiences are also often socially shared in social interactions (Zittoun, 2010)). One can “hear” a song in one's mind, because one's experience can be channeled or guided through semiotic configurations that are comparable to the initial ones. So finally, what does this say about internalization? In that respect, internalization is not putting “in” what has been “out”: first, semiotic guidance operates at the boundary of self and the world; and second, it allows guiding one's inner flow of experience through semiotic configuration now self-initiated.

Layering up experiences across the lifecourse

The concepts of position exchange and symbolic resources reconceptualize internalization in a comparable way; instead of some external cultural content having to breach the threshold between outer and inner worlds, it is the person moving between social positions and within semiotic guidance that accumulates layers of experience (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2013). In position exchange, situations create experiences, and people are conceptualized as moving between socially patterned experiences. In symbolic resources, cultural artefacts such as books and films create experiences, and people are conceptualized as, first, being moved within these guided experiences, and second, moving between such experiences. In both cases there is something external, a situation or a cultural artefact, that scaffolds and guides human experience. In both cases, strictly speaking, there is nothing that becomes internalized, rather, there is an external world that produces an experience. The experience is called ‘internal’ merely because it is not accessible to observers, it has private qualia that cannot be captured from an observers' perspective. Thus, we would argue, in response to the first debate (discussed above), that there is no necessary problem with the internal/external metaphor provided we do not apply the metaphor in a simplistic manner.

What makes the proposed approach to internalization interesting is that the experiences which are created, in the various social positions and across the wide diversity of symbolic resources, are rarely consistent with one another. As these experiences leave traces within the person, in the accumulation of experiences the individual becomes a locus of clashing experiences, a clash, that we suggest, underlies much of our psychological life. For example, each person is a unique space-time trajectory, and thus a unique combination of experiences, and thus locus of this clash (Mead, 1932). Each person is forced to produce their own, often creative, response to the contradictions of society;

contradictions which the individual embodies through this layering up of experience that is from society and thus reflective of society. Thus, we argue, in relation to the second debate (discussed above), that the unique trajectory of each individual through this matrix of social and cultural experiences ensures that internalization is not mere reproduction, but instead always a creative process that is interacting with past layers of experience.

People's life trajectories lead them to move through diverse spheres of experiences, both proximal and distal (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a). Proximal experiences are guided by the immediate social environment, social situations they share with others in specific material and social locations, for example, being absorbed in the demands and action of teaching. Distal experiences are disconnected from the immediate social setting, they include past proximal experiences which are mobilized in the present (such as one's memories of being a student when teaching oneself) and imaginary experiences, such as vicarious experiences created by a film (such as the film *Detachment*, following a young teacher) (Kaye, 2012). Thus, at any moment in time and space, as person can be located in one specific proximal experience, but mobilize a large number of distal experiences. These are often not discrete, but layered up and, at a psychological level, interacting. Hence, when teaching, a person might mobilize many teacher-student experiences, as well as various symbolic resources, now partly fused with personal experiences. In effect, experiences can be brought through lateral integration from one situation to another. They can also be more vertically integrated when they become more abstract or diffuse (such as a principle to never judge a student without first listening to the his or her account). Of course, as experiences are never homogeneous, these integrations can be source of tensions. For instance, a teacher might like to give autonomy to trusted students, but if confronted with a particularly uncooperative class, the teacher might feel compelled to use authority. Also, some more specific past experiences (such as the memory of a conflict with a student that turned into a legal case) might stand out as an emotionally-laden event, which renders more ambivalent the situation and its possible resolutions. These tensions invite new sense making; occasioning the creation of a new possible answer, using symbolic resources to imagine alternatives, or prompting a new integration of experiences. Tensions, ruptures (Zittoun et al., 2003; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a), and Gegenstand (Valsiner, 2014) are the conditions for the emergence of new ideas.

In proposing a model of person, body and mind, moving through situations and culturally guided experiences, we have tried to demonstrate the necessary layered nature of mind. What layers up within the individual is not culture per se, but rather experiences patterned by culture. This layered nature opens the space to conceptualize movement in mind, as the emergence of new ideas, the expression of agency or subjectivity, or the possibility to enrich the social and cultural environment. It is this integrative model that we propose to further the concept of internalization; internalization not as the simplistic importation of that which was external, but, as a complex layering up of experiences and responses occasioned by diverse, and potentially even contradictory, social settings and cultural guidance structures.

Conclusion

The notion of internalization plays a key role in cultural psychology; it designates the core process by which culture becomes mind, and it begins to account for how mind can create culture. However its apparent simplicity creates theoretical epistemological and methodological difficulties. In twenty years of *Culture & Psychology*, the notion has moved from a general and somewhat simplistic metaphor borrowed from translations of Vygotsky's texts, to a much more articulated concept, partly through the critical analysis of Toomela in 1996.

More recently diverse authors have pursued their attempts to analyze more finely the dynamics of internalization. To mention only a few, the development of dialogical approaches, notably through the work of Ivana Marková, shows the tensions and dynamic that come to the fore when the person's dialogue with her environment produces inner dialogues (Bertau, 2007, 2012; Grossen & Salazar Orvig, 2011; Marková, 2000, 2003). From a perspective nourished by clinical work, Sergio Salvatore proposes to articulate the social meanings of signs together with their emotional modes of diffusion in mind (Salvatore, 2013). Through the development of his dynamic semiotic developmental approach, Jaan Valsiner theorizes the dynamics by which meaning can be created, blocked, or diffused in mind, for instance through processes of schematization and pleromatization (Valsiner, 2006, 2014), which allows fine-grained analysis of internalization. To complement these approaches, other metaphors, such as that of catalysis, are proposed to analyze the non-causal dynamics by which internalization might bring to new processes (Cabell & Valsiner, 2014). Our own attempt to develop a dynamic, integrative model of development can be seen as contribution to a dynamic, situated, developmental understanding of internalization.

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