**Niels Bohr Professorship Lectures in Cultural Psychology**

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*The Psychology of Imagination: History, Theory, and New Research Horizons* (2017)
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# The Psychology of Imagination

## History, Theory, and New Research Horizons

**Edited by**

**Brady Wagoner, Ignacio Brescó de Luna, and Sarah H. Awad**
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**Information Age Publishing, Inc.**
Charlotte, North Carolina • www.infoagepub.com

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

CIP data for this book can be found on the Library of Congress website:
http://www.loc.gov/index.html

**Paperback:** 978-1-68123-709-1
**Hardcover:** 978-1-68123-710-7
**E-Book:** 978-1-68123-711-4



Printed in the United States of America

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CHAPTER 7

# FANTASY AND IMAGINATION

## From Psychoanalysis to Cultural Psychology

**Tania Zittoun**

The waters hissed, the waters rose,
The Fisherman alongside,
Quietly gazing at his rod,
Cool at heart, inside.
And as he listens, as he sits,
The waters split and rise:
Out of the flowing waters hiss
A mermaid meets his eyes.

—From the *Fisherman*, Goethe, 1778
(Goethe, 2012, p. 105)[1]

### THE FORGOTTEN PART OF PSYCHOLOGY

In his impressive historical chapter, Cornejo proposes to explore the major contributions to the study of fantasy before a new, modern psychology reduced it to mere reproductive imagination, losing much of the depth of the initial notion. Fantasy was forgotten by psychology, he

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argues, and left to other disciplines emerging at the 19th century, such as psychoanalysis and phenomenology. In Cornejo's reading, Goethe plays an important role, giving a full and new status to fantasy as part of his whole developmental reflection on light, aesthetics, and mind. In that frame, fantasy appears as a fundamental, embodied mode of experiencing the world and knowing through it: "fantasy represents the faculty to fully feel this world, that is, to see nature's inner relationships and not merely the superficial ones." (Cornejo, this volume). Cornejo also highlights Vico's contribution to the notion, which pursues a similar line, when he considered fantasy or imagination as the key capacity to accede to other people's lives, in distinct time and spaces, where the method of fantasy

> seeks its proofs not in the external world but *within the modifications of the mind of him who meditates it*. For, as we have said above, since this world of nations has certainly been made by men, it is within these modifications that its principles should have been sought. (Vico, 1725/1948, para. 374; emphasis added; as quoted in Cornejo, this volume)

Vico also encourages adults and educators to support imagination in children with the use of various symbolic resources; hence, imagination can complete their first learning of both things to be memorized and understood, so as to render them lively and meaningful (Vico, 2004; Zittoun, 2015b). Vico had not only a theory of the role of imagination in ontogenesis, he also saw it functioning in the microgenetic emergence of ideas, and at a sociogenetic level. There, he claimed, in ancient times, people's fear of the unknown forces of nature led them to imagine gods and creatures acting behind these; the universe thus populated with imagined creatures became much more familiar and understandable (Granatella, 2015; Vico, 1993). Culture, thus, is the result of the work of imagination rendering the world meaningful.

As Cornejo underlines, such understandings are lost after Kant's divisions between a productive and reproductive imagination, which will then be flattened out by later authors in forms of relatively passive functions of mind, with a rather great mistrust in psychology for a creative imagination—the latter being anyway considered as inaccessible scientifically (but see Tanggaard & Brinkman, in press; Zittoun, 2016).

It is to note that in current psychology, very few approaches have developed an understanding of an embodied, emotional imagination, binding experience and insight into a way to know into, or through, the world, partly because psychology in general has given little consideration to emotions and embodiment as part of understanding or development.

In what follows, I will first come back to some work that Cornejo considers outside of psychology but that, in my understanding, is still part of its attempt to understand human mind in society, that is, psychoanalysis. I then try to integrate the old intuitions highlighted by Cornejo in our current effort to develop a sociocultural and integrative model of imagination.



## Fantasy and Imagination in Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is a domain of investigation developed by Sigmund Freud (1865–1939) at the beginning of the 20th century. Trained as a medical doctor and neurologist, Freud found himself progressively dissatisfied with the existing theories able to explain a great number of patients' suffering. Called "hysterical," these persons seemed to fight with imaginary physical pain or be haunted by fears or forces blocking their intelligence or relation to the world in very selective ways. Freud progressively formulated a new model of psychic life, in which unconscious dynamics play a main role.

In very simplified terms, his idea was that human emotional and embodied experience needs, in order to come to consciousness, to be associated to traces of experiences which themselves can be linked to traces of words or socialized signs. Once semiotized, these can become part of the train of our consciousness. However, internalized social rules or unprocessed emotional experience can create barriers to such flow of consciousness, and thus some part of our experience simply never become part of our awareness. Intrinsic to the psychoanalytical enquiry is thus the idea that an important part of human experience, deeply emotional and embodied, is partly decoupled from the demands of reality (Freud, 1940, 1978).

Freud very early in his work used the German term *Phantasie* to designate this component of psychic experience, first in a sense close to the common sense, and from 1897 as a concept (Roudinesco & Plon, 2011, p. 432). In an 1897 letter to his friend Fliess, his main interlocutor in these years, Freud writes,

> Phantasies arise from an unconscious combination, in accordance with certain trends, of things experienced and heard. These trends are towards making inaccessible the memory from which the symptoms have emerged or might emerge. Phantasies are constructed by a process of amalgamation and distortion analogous to the decomposition of a chemical body which is compounded with another one. For the first sort of distortion consists in a falsification of memory by a process of fragmentation in which chronological relations in particular are neglected. (Chronological relations seem precisely to depend on the activity of the system of consciousness). A fragment of the visual scene is then joined up with a fragment of the auditory one and

> made up into the phantasy, while the fragment left over is linked up with something else. In this way it is made impossible to trace up an earlier connection. (Freud, 1897/1966, p. 252)

Such initial theorization will then be expanded and refined in Freud's subsequent work. However, before going there, it is interesting to examine what relation such hypothesis has with Goethe's understanding of *Phantasie*.

Freud was a very well-read man, with a deep interest in literature and the arts. He was knowledgeable of Goethe's work both as a poet and as a theoretician. Goethe is often quoted and mentioned in Freud's writing, with different statuses and purposes. First, in his adolescent writings, Freud quotes Goethe in a letter to a friend to underline the need to be true to oneself, as a guidance toward self-knowledge (Bernat, 2009, p. 297). Many commentators will underline this role of internal mentor or guide that Freud finds in Goethe (e.g., Holt, 2013; Jaimes, 2014; Schneider, 1999). Second, as a consequence, Freud uses Goethe's writings to define an epistemological stance, a will to go beyond the obvious and look for hidden explanations, with the risk of making great yet risky discoveries. For instance, in one of his 1897 letters to Fliess, Freud interprets one of his dreams in the light of a poem by Goethe; the dream itself is about the wish to find the deep source of inspiration of his theory, as Goethe once did (Freud, 1966, p. 262). Reversely, he will mock his colleague Breuer's fear to go deep enough in the psyche of Anna O., only himself having the Faustian courage to do so (and hence founding psychoanalysis) (Personal communication, Freud-Zweig, February 6, 1932, as quoted in Bernat, 2009, p. 298). Third, Freud very often completes or underlines his thinking through examples taken from poets, including from Goethe. In the *Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 2001b), Freud adds three extracts of Goethe's poems as footnotes or in the text to his interpretation of his or other people's dreams; he mentions his interpretation of Shakespeare, as well as the origin of his inspiration.

Fourth, and more interestingly for us here, in his attempts to understand mind, creativity, and imagination, Freud mentions Goethe's creative process. Hence, as he is at the beginning of defining the modalities of work of the unconscious, and just after having defined *Phantasie* in 1897, in a further letter to Fliess Freud analyzes Goethe's creative process as a variation of the process of phantasy:

> The mechanism of poetry [creative writing] is the same as that of hysterical phantasies. For his *Werther* Goethe combined something he had experienced (his love for Lotte Kästner) and something he had heard (the fate of young Jerusalem who died in his own hand). He was probably toying with the idea of killing himself and found a point of contact in that and identified himself with Jerusalem, to whom he lent a motive from his own love-story. By means of this phantasy he protected himself from the consequences of his experience. (Freud, 1966, p. 256)



Hence, although it is beyond my role and my capacities here to explore how much Freud knew about Goethe's theory of phantasy itself, it is clear that Freud was deeply knowledgeable and an admirer of the man and his work. The search for a truer understanding of mind, the risk-taking attitude to make hypotheses about its deep unity and mysteries, as well as the developmental posture of Freud can be seen as pursuing a project that Freud saw exemplified in Goethe's work. In addition, man of his time, trained as scientist and not as poet, Freud has a deep pragmatist epistemology, which allowed him to constantly confront his speculations with empirical and clinical facts, and to revise these in the light of their explanatory and pragmatic power (Zittoun, 2015a).

This being said, Freud's investigation of what he initially called phantasy took many ways. His analysis of people's symptoms, of works of art, of his own life and dreams and of others' dreams allowed for the creation of a very complex model of psyche, accounting for the many ways by which thoughts are generated and transformed, blocked, and distorted. This led to two interdependent evolutions. On the one hand, Freud saw the origin of phantasy in very basic and early needs and drives, which he called sexual and are deeply rooted in early relationships, and connected to hunger, sensual pleasure, or intellectual curiosity. Depending on their satisfaction or repressions, these give rise in the infant to various basic unconscious phantasies about one's place in the world or the structure of relationships; these, to some extent, remain as organizers of the adult's psychic life. In Freud's work, the term *phantasy* came thus to designate the imaginary scenario at work in all layers of mind, more or less conscious, and which underline its various semiotic productions. On the other hand, the processes defined as resulting from Phantasy above will progressively be refined in Freud's analysis of dream. What was initially "amalgamation and distortion" will be more subtly analyzed in the basic processes of displacement, condensation, and figuration of various contents on diverse semiotic material (Freud, 2001a, 2001b; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). These processes of the "dream work" are the semiotic transformations that allow thoughts, embodied experiences, and emotions to take a semiotic form that one can become aware of, or socially shared. The same processes will be identified by Freud in dreams, daydreaming, and artistic and scientific creation (Freud, 1959).

Altogether, Freud tried to understand both the origin of phantasies and their effects. Although dreams, daydreaming, or human creations are not phantasies themselves, these are the expressions of deep underlying

scenarios organizing people's lives—desires, longings, impossibilities (see also Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967, pp. 152–157). Yet as a whole, this constitutes the phantasmatic life, which confuses temporalities and causalities and allows people to feel the many layers of their lives as concatenation of all their past experiences buzzing in the background of the present.

Interestingly, and although there is no proof that Freud had actually read Vico (Verene, 1997, p. 502), their understanding of the role of imagination in human life and society have similarities as well. One can for instance quickly recall Freud's attempts to explain the creation of Gods and civilization, where inside fears and drives are the leading forces behind the projection of imaginary powers in the world (Freud, 1913).

## Fantasy and Imagination After Freud

The term *Phantasie* had various fates in the psychoanalytical tradition, progressively losing its contact with Goethe's intuitions still present in Freud's work. For instance, one core debate in psychoanalysis, since Freud and after him, has been whether psychic life and more specifically neurosis and symptoms were only defined by phantasmatic scenarios, independently of any connection with true, real events experienced by people (for a short introduction, see Roudinesco & Plon, 2011, pp. 432–437). Depending on psychoanalytical schools' positions, more or less attention has thus been given to phantasies.

For instance, in the British school following Melanie Klein's work, infantile unconscious phantasies play a major role (Klein, 1975); these are quite clearly defined (it is about very basic instinctual moves) and distinguished from more conscious fantasizing. Hence, after this work, two terms have been defined: phantasy with *ph* to designate unconscious basic scenarios, and fantasy with *f* to designate a more general imagination involved in creativity and daydreaming (Segal, 1991). In the French tradition, Jacques Lacan's work took a different stance, defining a different role for fantasy, an organizing principle of mind, clearly distinct in its function from what he called the imaginary (a presemiotic range of experiences), itself distinct from the symbolic, understood as the range of experiences that come subsumed into language (e.g., Lacan, 1978).

More interestingly for contemporary cultural psychology, the independent British psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott proposed to distinguish three zones of experience: that of inner life (with its fantasmatic scenarios, unconscious life, emotional and embodied, etc.), the zone of contact with the real and its demands (social and material), and the zone of imagination, which is at the meeting of inner life and the real. Winnicott made a distinction between fantasizing which is self-enclosed, for instance as a



form of rumination, and imagining, which occurs in such a contact zone. Imagination, according to him, occurs in the zone of cultural experiences, and it allows one to work through, or elaborate new psychic contents, which enriches human experience in a creative way (Colombi, 2010; Kuhn, 2013; Winnicott, 2001; Zittoun, 2013). In that sense, this rich experience, combining inner and outer life and adding to it in a novel way, is closer to Goethe's propositions than we could have expected.

## Theorizing Imagination in Cultural Psychology Today

Imagination was once seen as a core, uniquely human faculty, part both of our ability to deeply experience our environment and our life with others, and to create our cultural environment. Part of this richness precisely was to be found in its emotional and embodied nature (Cornejo, this volume).

As recalled above, Carlos Cornejo suggests that the richness of the psychological study of fantasy was lost at the end of the 19th century. So far, we have seen how it has been addressed by psychoanalysis. In psychology at-large, for different reasons linked to the evolution of occidental thought and techniques, human and social science progressively reduced imagination to a poor version of reason, versatile if not dangerous. On the individual level, imagination was mainly considered and treated as acceptable as long as it was temporary, or linked to a state of exception or marginality, such as in children, artists, or the mentally ill. On the collective side, imagination has often been seen as the threatening power of irrationality, likely to bring crowds and societies to the worst abominations. As a consequence, imagination has often been reduced to a flat version of representation, a subpart of rational decision, or accepted when leading to socially recognized, that is, ultimately marketable, creativity (for an overview, see Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). However, imagination has not totally disappeared from the project of a more general psychology. Independently from psychoanalysis, yet compatible with its attention to the semiotic, embodied, and emotional nature of imagination (Zittoun, 2011), cultural psychology is currently reexpanding the notion of imagination.

Cultural psychology has developed with a triple inspiration in the work of Vygotsky and other Russian authors, the American pragmatist traditions, and the rediscovery of the *Ganzheit* German tradition of psychology (Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996; Diriwächter & Valsiner, 2008; Valsiner, 2012, 2014). From this triple anchorage, it has become a psychology which is deeply historical and developmental, aiming at understanding phenomena in the wholeness, which implies examining people's location and

participation within a role of culture and with a focus on sense-making. These aspects make cultural psychology compatible not only with the project of psychoanalysis, but also with both Goethe's project (Cornejo, this volume) as well as Vico's visions of a new science (Brinkmann, 2015; Zittoun, 2015b).

More specifically, there has also been recently in cultural psychology a movement of rehabilitation of fantasy or imagination, anchored in these foundational authors, yet attentive to integrating other advances in psychology and the social sciences. Authors have thus drawn on Vygotsky's strong intuitions about the role of imagination (Vygotsky, 1931, 1933) and have expanded and actualized these ideas in the light of empirical material (Jovchelovitch, 2010; Pelaprat & Cole, 2011; Zittoun & Cerchia, 2013; Zittoun et al., 2013). This has led to theories of imagination which continue both Vico and Goethe's visions of imagination and fantasy (although this is not the term used in English) yet have also complemented them.

A first specificity of these approaches over previous works up to Kant is a shift from topological models to processual models. For Goethe, for instance, fantasy is a Faculty of mind. Other works in psychology (still) consider imagination as a part of the mind, a place in the brain, or a specific module. In contrast, cultural psychology conceives of imagination as a specific dynamic in the flow of an ongoing thinking stream.

More precisely, inspired by Vygotsky (1931, 1933), but also drawing on William James, Donald W. Winnicott, Georges H. Mead, as well as Freud's work, we have recently proposed an integrative model of imagination (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Imagination for us designates a specific range of semiotic process, or a specific movement within the stream of consciousness. We have called it the "loop" of imagination.

> Imagination, we propose, is the process of creating experiences that escape the immediate setting, which allow exploring the past or future, present possibilities or even impossibilities. Imagination feeds on a wide range of experiences people have of, or through the cultural world, through diverse senses, now combined, organized and integrated in new forms. Imagination can either be more or less deliberate; it can be enjoyed in itself (such as in a daydream) or be part of a more deliberative process of creation. Imagination is a process, in the sense that it only exists in the making, which we call a looping dynamic. In other words, we are not interested in an abstract capability for imagination that exists independently of the real-time process of imagining, or in the stable outputs of imagination sometimes called "the imaginary." Imagination, we maintain, is a social and cultural process, because, although it is always individuals who imagine, the process of imagination is made possible by social and cultural artefacts, it can be socially allowed or constrained, and because the consequences of imagination can be significant changes in the social world. (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016, p. 2)



In that sense, imagination includes experiences such as remembering yesterday's events, wondering how it would be to hike through the Gobi Desert, or planning the transformation of the road system into an electric one. Indeed, all these experiences demand the momentary abandonment (at least in one's dominant stream of thought) to explore (i.e., construct) another sphere of experience, distant in time or space, or simply not responding to the usual rules of social life, time, and causality.

Second, as many authors before us, we have attempted to distinguish the variety of shapes and outcomes of imagination. However, rather than theorizing different capacities, or senses, or zones of mind, we have proposed a vectorial model—a model of a 3-dimensional space, organized around dimensions that create an infinite space of possible occurrences (Zittoun, 2014; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016, Ch. 3). We have proposed to organize this theoretical, vectorial space, along the dimensions of time, generalization, and plausibility. Hence, as intentional activity, imagination can have different temporal aboutnesses: imagining can be oriented toward the past of the imaginer, or the future, or some alternative present. Imagining can then be defined about specific events or occurrences, or in general terms. Finally, imagining can take shape or be about things that have some chances to become actual in a given sphere of experience, or that are highly unlikely to ever become true or be socially acknowledged. Visually, this means that the loop can be represented as a loop, or a bubble, leaning toward a temporal dimension, more or less flatly, or with more or less depth. For instance, imagining a fisherman meeting a mermaid, as Goethe does in his *Fisherman* poem, is oriented in a parallel present, both quite general and rather implausible (see Figure 7.1).

Note also that an important aspect of such a loop is precisely that it ends, bringing back the person to the here-and-now of a socially situated activity. Only this looping-out has now changed, even minimally, the person's experience, bringing relief, an aesthetical experience, or a good idea. Hence, imagining fishing in the shadow of trees along a mountain river on a very hot day, one can feel slightly cooled down.

Third, this looping model expands Goethe's idea, highlighted by Cornejo, of the emotional and experiential roots of imagination. In effect, according to our model, the movement of the loop is nourished by all available semiotic material, within or around the person, or available in her semiosphere. Hence, imagining mermaids demands drawing on specific symbolic resources—paintings or movies or stories about mermaids. Also, imagining fishing and meeting a mermaid demands drawing on much more personal experiences. Writing a poem about mermaids,

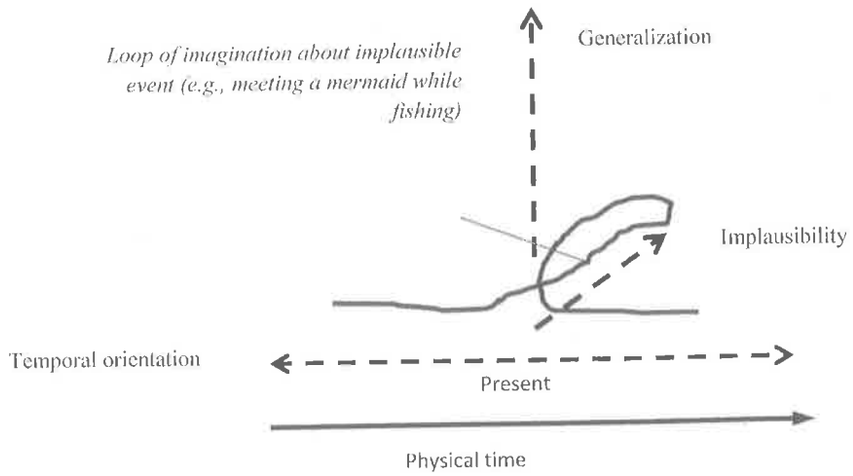


Figure 7.1. Implausible imagining in a 3-dimensional space.

daydreaming or escaping from one's prison cell, one can imagine fishing. In all cases, imagining draws on one's embodied experiences, such as sitting still, smelling the water, hearing the flow of the water and the murmur of the leaves blowing in the wind, feeling the humidity and the sun on one's skin. These experiences are sensual, perceptual, embodied, and emotional. Yet, like any other, such experiences are likely to leave mnemonic traces, especially if they have become object of our attention. Then these can be, as any other semiotic resources, used to construct new experiences in the intimacy of our embodied mind, or shareable in a poem or in a painting. And these experiences are configured in new, unique ways, through processes that can be described using Freud's term *displacement*. As such, these can both use cultural resources or acquire a symbolic, sharable form, yet they also have a unique emotional and embodied resonance.

The fourth specificity of our understanding of imagination is specifically rooted in the sociocultural perspective. In effect, from such a view, any experience of imagining is, even the most private one, deeply sociocultural. Not only are some of the resources used to imagine usually cultural in their origin, such a stories about mermaids, the semiotic nature of imagining as well as the sociocultural location of that activity (like any other) make it inherently sociocultural. One implication of this is, for instance, that the development or shape of the loop is in effect seen as enabled and constrained by the semiotic material we have internalized, and by the actual condition of our living, symbolic as well as material. It is



not the same to imagine a mermaid while writing a plausible conclusion for a school essay, to daydream in one's hammock on holidays, or to imagine while in jail so as to keep some sanity (Cohen & Taylor, 1992).

Altogether, this type of theorization thus pursues intuitions developed by Goethe and Vico, refines these analyses through the confrontation to empirical material, as done by psychoanalysis, and socializes them in the light of more social and cultural understanding of human experience. This allows then to develop an actionable model, that is, a model that allows us to account for conditions in which people cannot imagine, for instance, when they are taken in administrative or political relationships that do not fully acknowledge them, or reduce their access to resources (Marková, in press), or to create conditions for children to imagine better (e.g., Hilppö, Rajala, Zittoun, Kumpulainen, & Lipponen, 2016), or also, to better understand the conditions in which a society could face major crises (Wagoner, Jensen, & Oldmeadow, 2012; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016, Ch. 7).

## TO CONCLUDE: *A MERMAID MEETS HIS EYES ...*

Fantasy and imagination are the mermaids of psychology—always hidden under the surface and ready to jump out of the flow. Like careful fishermen, most psychologists have avoided the apparent dangerous seduction of this figure of the depth. A few braver authors, poets, visionaries, as identified by Cornejo, or ambitious scientists and especially psychoanalysts, as recalled here, have tried to give a space, if not to capture, the range of phenomena designated by the terms fantasy and imagination.

More modestly, and thanks to the important work of authors in various fields, we can now look more carefully at this strange creature. By understanding imagination as individual and cultural process, we may perhaps find new ways to understand learning and development in the life course, and also, allow for the transformations of our societies' imaginative horizons (Crapanzano, 2004). In effect, although many irrationalities of our current world might be attributed to the dangerous powers of irrationality and fantasy, it needs perhaps even more individual and collective imagination to accompany the emergence of new societal pathways.

## NOTE

1. Trans. A. S. Kline (2004), http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Goethepoems.htm

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CHAPTER 8

# HOPE AS FANTASY

## An Existential Phenomenology of Hoping in Light of Parental Illness

**Ditte Alexandra Winther-Lindqvist**

> The development of a creative individual, one who strives for the future, is enabled by creative imagination embodied in the present.
>
> —Vygotsky (2004, p. 88)

In most psychological theorizing on fantasy and imagination, imagining is explained as the creative ability to form mental images, to bring to present that which is in fact not present, that is, not directly perceivable, not tangible, nor factual. Often the metaphor of drawing an image of one-self through mental construction and representation is at the center of description. The experiential status of the "imagined" and the relation between imagining and the real are ongoing discussions in theoretical psychology (Valsiner, 2014). The attempts to come to grips with both what imagination is, how fantasy and imagining relate to reality, and the functions that imagination serves for us, not to mention its process, many forms, and how these develop, is a quest in recent theorizing in cultural

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