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From Person-Oriented to Person-Centered Psychology: Abstracting Structures of Relationships

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Abstract: Although the investigation of persons should be natural for psychological science by its inherent logic, this has not been the case in the history of the discipline, where selected other species – rats, dogs, pigeons, and chimpanzees – have been made to "stand in" for human beings. Consequently the knowledge of human psychological processes has been slow to advance, and recurrent calls for "bringing the person back" into psychology are needed. Moving beyond such calls, I distinguish the Person-Oriented and Person-Centered perspectives that both have had times of appearance, disappearance, and re-appearance in the history of psychology. In the search for new forms of person-centered research, unpacking the processes that remain hidden behind the generic term *relationship* makes it possible to advance consistently qualitative perspectives on human life course. These processes operate at the border of the person and environment, and in the quest for understanding what happens at that border Person-Oriented and Person-Centered approaches of today are complementary.

Keywords: relations, social guidance of science, evidence, person, development

Psychology is strange. It is supposedly making sense of human beings—yet these living creatures seem nowhere in sight if one attempts to read a scientific psychology journal. Instead, one encounters asterisks[1] and numbers. If psychology is science it should produce generalized knowledge – yet one can hardly find generalizations that go beyond common sense in these treatises. The discipline that should tell us something profound about human beings ends up accumulating empirical accounts of unknown authorship. It is the persons who are the authors of their lives. And they are not there, on the pages of psychology journals. Anonymous crunched numbers prevail. Where are the persons behind such presentations?

The Person Got Lost – How Come?

The person is practically invisible. Most paradoxically, the person has episodically vanished from contemporary psychology (Bergman & Lundh, 2015). Instead we can observe substitutes – rats, pigeons, monkeys, and crowds of human beings, rather than persons – used as if they represent the intricacies of the human *psyche.* It seems weird—if a layperson were to look in the mirror and see a rat, there would be a major existential crisis in the making. Neither the mirror nor the looker might survive. Yet when a psychologist proudly claims that neural centers of moral judgment have been found in the brain of a white rat this might be hailed as a major breakthrough in the understanding of *human* higher psychological functions.

Even when human beings have been studied, they have usually been investigated as lacking personal uniqueness – as merely specimens that make up a sample, supposedly "drawn" from a "general population". These samples become represented by their group level statistics (e.g. their average) or prototypical specimens – by rules of inductive generalization. Yet here is a conceptual trap – the replacement of the person by an average could work only under conditions that *Homo sapiens* constituted a homogeneous

[1] Asterisks that mark the "statistical significance" of humanly insignificant findings.

class as a species – which it blatantly does not (Maruyama, 1963; Valsiner, 1986, 1987). This kind of a procedure – a *substitution error*[2] – is not only rampant but considered methodologically normative. Something has indeed gone wrong in the kingdom of scientific psychology over the last century (Toomela & Valsiner, 2010).

How could a situation like this happen in a science? Quite obviously persons who enter into the profession of psychology and who become leading researchers glorify it under the banner of its supposed "evidence-based[3]" nature. Reasons for this are social, rather than epistemological. While in the present they fortify the epidemiological approach in medical and social sciences, their reasons date back to the times when psychology as science was only emerging in its historical context. Psychology is a hostage to the axiomatic use of general propositions that mismatch with human psychological phenomena (Valsiner, 2012). Various social expectations of the need to look like a "real" science block the change of the axioms (Yurevich, 2009).

Psychology's history has been non-linear. There have been clear periods during which persons have been emphasized as being at the very core of developmental psychology (1920s-1930s and since 1970s), interspersed with periods of downgrading the focus on persons (1940s-60s). Interestingly, the focus on issues of development has had similar ups and downs in the history of psychology. The study of development has had a hard time finding its place in psychology (Cairns, 1998) – it has been circumscribed as child or old-age ("life-span") development (both categories viewed as in need of social control and assistance). Efforts to develop a theoretically consistent full life-course developmental psychology have been few, and recent (Zittoun et al, 2013). It looks as if psychology as science has been following the demands for focusing on the "other-aged" (i.e. the objects of research are either younger, or older, than the researchers) who could be "a social problem" as their ways of being are different from those of the researchers. Needs and mischiefs of children and adolescents can be of such kind, as well as that of the development in older ages. The age group who is summoned to study development – younger and middle-aged academics – is left out of focus. The development of the middle level of the life course has passed by the interests of social institutions that give economic guidance to research. Psychology has tried to be socially useful – and that might be a social problem in itself.

Becoming Socially Useful: Why?

Psychology emerged in the post-Napoleonic era in Germany (Valsiner, 2012), as a discipline called upon to be useful in social practices, in keeping order in communities and within the minds of community members. Its explicitly "scientific" role emerges later, when it becomes an extension of physiology into the domain of the human psyche in the 1850s-1870s. The theme of "social usefulness" of the field lingered on into the 20th century, in conjunction with making the usefulness criterion central as invented by pragmatist philosophical traditions.

Yet there is "usefulness" in plural: what is useful for me (as a person) might be useless for you (as another person), or dangerous for a third person or a community of similarly tuned minds. It implies goals – and coordination of goals of persons, communities and society as a whole. The societal changes over the 19th century and its revolutions (1830, 1848) and the unifications of countries (Germany, Italy) brought the tension between persons – kings, their mistresses, or generals – and masses of persons (workers in the new industries, soldiers in military campaigns, etc.) at times to ruptures that broke the social order. The invention of the abstracted notion of "the average person" by Adolphe Quetelet was an effort to turn the faceless masses into a person with an abstract and somewhat recognizable face. Ever since 1835 we are involved in our personal dialogues with "the average man" (or woman), anxiously comparing oneself with the average while hoping (all) to be above it[4]. The person, the average, and the crowd become fused together in our thinking (Valsiner, 1986) and the average becomes a socially conventional substitute of the person in scientific methodology.

The impact of such substitution can be fatal in person-oriented practices, but can pass without notice at the level of social conglomerates of institutions, armies, and political parties. The vanishing of the person from researchers' view is in many ways a result of developing various social systems of democratic governance and large-scale economic practices where the net list of a person's technical skills became more important (in personnel selection) than the life-course personal happiness in being an employee in the given company.

The loss of the person-focus helped various social institutions to treat persons as objects ("they") rather than "we, the decision makers." *Einfühlung* – a major concept in psychology at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries – became abandoned in the practices of testing US Army recruits in World War I, and the hiring and firing of workers in the personnel practices of the 1920s. *Feeling into* the thousands of soldiers who went to fight the

[2] Substitutions are normal in creating scientific models. Yet not every substitution works, if tested against the nature of the phenomena considered.

[3] In recent decades (since the 1970s), the notion of "evidence" has come to refer exclusively to samples-based aggregated data, excluding the individual case.

[4] The only success in the latter social engineering task is Garrison Kieler's Lake Wobagone community where all children are above average.

"Glorious War" would have been detrimental for the administration of "war effort" on all sides. Psychology was made useful in the war effort for the societal goals that made use of persons – hence the focus on persons was limited only to the use of these persons. A man who became a soldier was important *as a soldier*, and not *as a person* who was temporarily dressed in a soldier's uniform.

Treating persons as more (or less) widely distributed classes allowed for various versions of social distinction making. Thus,

> By the closing years of the nineteenth century it was common, especially in the United States, to formulate the human problems of urbanization, industrial concentration, and immigration in terms of the problems of *individuals as members of statistical aggregates*. Crime, delinquency, feeblemindedness and so on were easily attributed to the statistical distribution of certain individual characteristics. That meant the *transformation of structural social problems into the problems of individuals,* which were to be dealt with not by social change but by administrative means. (Danziger, 1990, p, 80, added emphasis)

Psychologists became recruited as servants in social management tasks. Diagnostic devices applied to persons became vehicles for projection of socially defined labels into the persons – not as living human beings but as "members of statistical aggregates" – and the individuals were blamed for the generalized characteristics of the latter. If you were found to belong to the class of "underachievers" you could be blamed for "being an underachiever", or if a child becomes diagnosed to belong to the class of persons with ADHD the road to Ritalin is looming on his or her horizon. Real persons can become affected by the use of aggregate data from anonymous masses of persons who are assumed to make up a "population."

Losing Persons through Aggregation: The Impasse of Psychology's Research Habits

Pointing to the uselessness of averages in psychology is not new (Lewin, 1931). The specific transformation of the person into a member of the class here has interesting features. To become a "member of a statistical aggregate" is an act quite opposite to that of joining a social group, community, or even society. *The aggregate has no ties between its members.* In fact, if such ties emerge the aggregate becomes useless for ("random") sampling purposes – which renders the belief in the "gold standard" of such sampling highly questionable. In addition to systemic relationships between human beings, each of them has a personal history of differential relations with others in the past that could be a meaningful basis for inviting them to participate in psychologists' research efforts (Valsiner and Sato, 2006).

In contrast to the notion of the aggregate – based on a "sample" from a "population" – any social unit from small groups upwards *is defined by the ties between their members*. Human beings function – from their biological organization upwards, to psychological, social, and economic domains – on the basis of *relationships*. Hence a "statistical aggregate" is an abstracted artifact where relationships are lost and has no representational value – neither for individuals as persons, nor for any social aggregates (as organized and self-organizing systems). Consequently, evidence that is produced on the basis of "statistical aggregates" is not applicable – neither to persons, nor to (or for) society or its communities. Least of all can such evidence be applicable to persons whose relationships make up both themselves and their communities. Persons need to be at the core of the psychology of human *being*, and of human beings.

Focusing on Persons: The Rebirth of a Basic Perspective

Ever since its start in the 1970s, the Person-Oriented Approach (POA) breaks out of the confines of the practice of substituting the person by a rat, a pigeon, a well-educated bonobo, a crowd (called "a sample"), or a computer. Yet "breaking out" is the easier part of the task – "moving in" to another set of basic assumptions is quite another. The establishment of the Journal of Person-Oriented Research (JPOR) is an example of the efforts of at least one sub-field of psychology (developmental) attempting to rejuvenate its research practices. It is not surprising that this innovation starts from the developmental side, stressing the complexity of the developmental processes and the inclusion of the time dimension (Bergman & Lundh, 2015).

The person-oriented approach generalizes knowledge based on single case profiles that represent holistic developing systems. Yet the basis for this focus is still a sample – often one of the social units within which persons live through their relationships (family, school classroom, etc.). The basis for arriving at a generalized model of development remains inductive and based on the traditions of studying samples. With such a focus, it is still constrained by the need to decide which empirically discovered formal relationships are substantive – and usually seen as causal.

Search for causality is hard. Psychology has been dominated by search for common-sensically legitimate causal attributions that could be considered as sufficient explanations for complex psychological phenomena. Seen from the viewpoint of semiotics, search for such attributions is a form of sign construction under the influence of constraints that pass the controlling meta-sign of *scientific*. Thus, in 21st century psychology the notion of *soul* is no longer an acceptable causal agent, whereas *self* is. Search for causes in the myriad of possible *personality traits* – otherwise rational transformations of the subjectivity-laden *characteristics of the soul* – is a transformation of the common sense legitimacy of science under historically changing social constraints. Psychology has lost its soul in the fight against

the soul – resulting in legitimization of mechanistic terms as explanatory agents. Together with this social transformation of scientific language a number of critically relevant research themes have vanished from focus – such as the inherent intentionality of psychological phenomena (Franz Brentano), or teleology in development (Hans Driesch).

Furthermore, psychology's construction of signs of appropriate causality has been primarily linear. Doubts about the predominate focus on linear causality have been expressed in the context of POA:

> Perhaps the ambition to demonstrate causality should be given less weight in most person-oriented studies to be replaced by, for instance, *the search for robust emerging typical patterns and their meaningful connections across time.* This more realistic goal leads to valuable knowledge in the form of an increased understanding of the process studied. (Bergman & Lundh, 2015, p. 5, added emphasis)

Robustness of emerging patterns in the case of open systems can be guaranteed only via high redundancy of the processes that need to guarantee ontogenetic progression along the lines of the given species. Since such systems are in principle unpredictable and (in their emergence) uncontrollable, the only possible strategy to guarantee expected development is by way of mutually complementary mechanisms that work in parallel. If one of these fails to function, others guarantee the equifinal result. Thus, developmental science needs to posit the functioning of more than one way of granting the development of basic functions. Currently what is in vogue is a "winner gets it all" mentality – a study reveals that "factors" X, Y, and Z "explain" substantial "parts of variance" (to use ANOVA language), after which the one that is reported to represent the highest percentage of the variance is designated as the functioning factor. This attribution leaves the other (equally relevant) factors in the shade. If their "interaction" is detected to be important, the investigation stops at that stage. The most relevant question – *how are the detected "factors" integrated into one functional system* that guarantees robust development under many (but not all) unpredictable conditions – is not even asked. Research stops at the place where it needs to begin! But if research can stop there, the developing person cannot – s/he needs to combine all available resources in the service of development.

As a Complement to POA: a Person-Centered Approach (PCA)

As a complementary perspective, the Person-Centered Approach (PCA) focuses on the person from "inside out" – assuming the reality of the living, experiencing, worrying, daydreaming, and acting individual person who can exist only through his or her relations with others, and with the *Umwelt*. The PCA is set up within the framework of idiographic science (Molenaar, 2004, Salvatore, 2014; Salvatore and Valsiner, 2010) with a focus that builds on the original ideas of Wilhelm Windelband (Lamiell, 2003) who emphasized the possibility to generalize on the basis of a single case. That latter focus leaves the inductive imperative of knowledge construction – often amplified by the claims for "empirical science[5]" – behind, and replaces these with making abductive inference the central vehicle of knowledge making (Salvatore, 2014).

The starting point for PCA is William Stern's personology. It is only recently that calls are made for bringing the person back to where it truly belongs. This move is predicated upon the foci that William Stern outlined as one of the key perspectives back in 1911 for empirical psychology (see Figure 1). All existing empirical research *foci* that psychology knows since 1911 are represented in Stern's organizational scheme – except his own (see Figure 2 below)! Psychology has been dominated by *Variationsforschung* and *Korrelationsforschung* in Stern's terms, despite the non-transferability of the latter (Valsiner, 1986) to individual lives in time (*Psychographie)* or even to comparison of life course trajectories (*Komparationsforschung).*

We can easily locate both POA and PCA in Stern's scheme. POA as it has developed over the past five decades can be viewed as an example of Stern's *Komparationsforschung* – the focus is on persons who are observed with the synchronous community over time. It is their profiles of characteristics at any time that serve as the basis for future development, and comparison of different persons in relation to one another over time preserves the persons in the data while allowing generalization of basic principles of human development. In contrast, PCA can be located in Stern's scheme as *Psychographie* – studying an individual person over his or her life course.

But how can any generalization be made from a psychographic description of single cases? The most crucial question in any science is that of representation – if we study phenomenon X, do we study that phenomenon in itself, or something else that is *represented* by the phenomenon?

This question brings us to the issue of scientific activity as a semiotic process. We are not just dealing with the "objective reality" we study, but we make sense of it through various types of signs, and claim that these signs represent some selected part of the object of our investigations.

Lev Vygotsky, who tried to make sense of the state of psychology of his time which he considered to be "in crisis", answered that question succinctly back in 1927, using the example of Ivan Pavlov's classic physiological experiments with dogs:

[5] No science can be exclusively "empirical" in the sense of the social imperative for relying upon inductive generalization. Science is by its nature generalizing – with a combination of inductive, deductive, and abductive operations applied to answering basic research questions within some domain of phenomena.

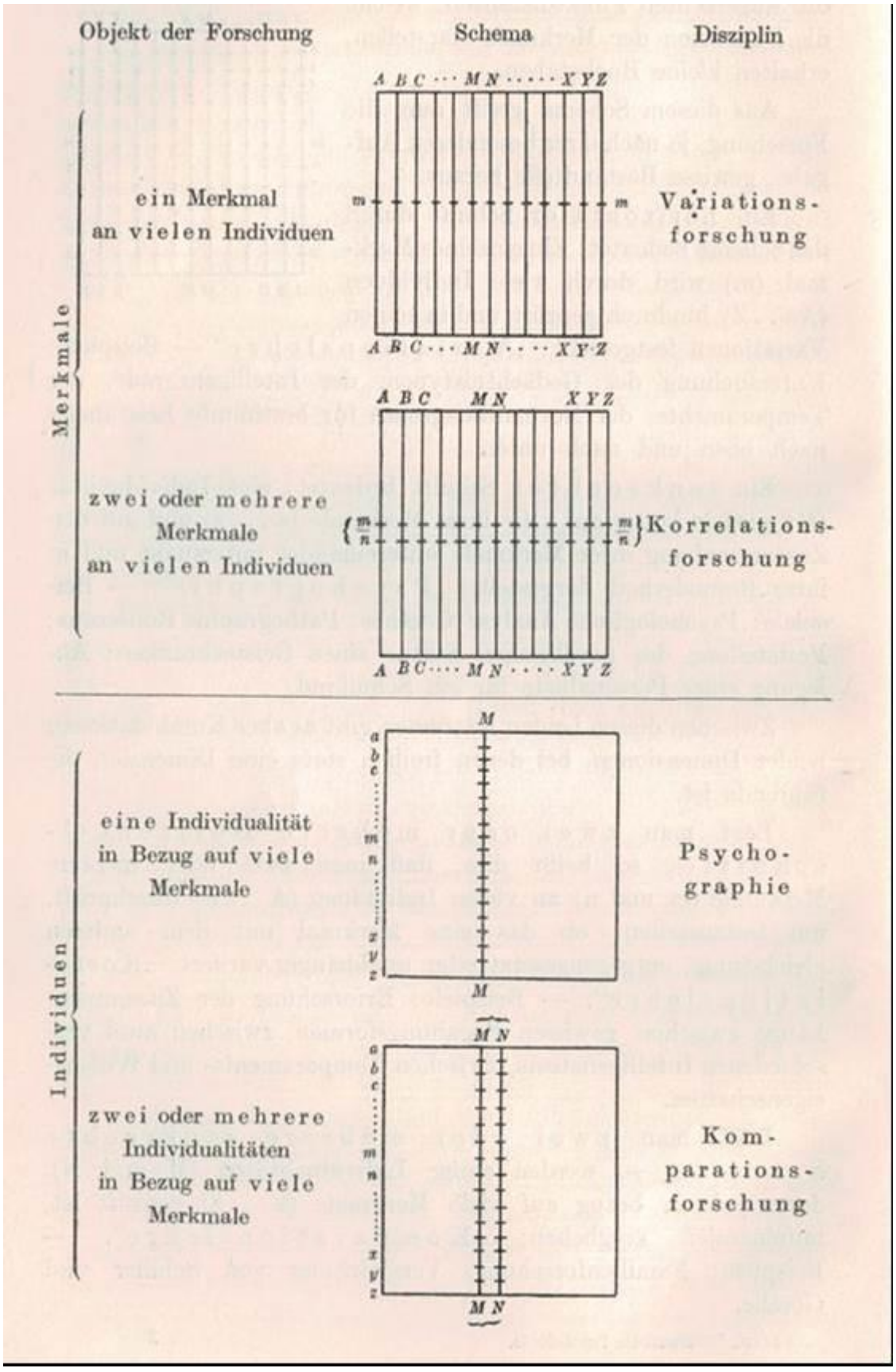

Figure 1. William Stern's outline of various approaches to research on the person (1911, p. 18).

> I.P. Pavlov practically studies the activity of the *salivary gland of the dog*. What gives him the right to call his study that of the higher nervous activity of *animals*? Maybe he should test his experiments on a horse, a crow, etc.—on all, or at least on the majority of animal species, so as to make his conclusions? Or, maybe he should label his study like this: investigation of salivation in the dog? But Pavlov did not study actually the salivation of a dog *as such*. His research does not add anything to our knowledge of the dog as such or salivation as such. In his studies of the dog he studied not the dog, but the *animal in general*, in salivation – the *reflex in general*, i.e. in the study of this animal and in that phenomenon he emphasized that what was common with all similar phenomena. That is why his conclusions not only relate to all animals but to all biology: the fact of salivation in the case of Pavlovian dogs to Pavlov's signals become directly into a general biological principle—transformation of the inherited experience into that of the animal. (Vygotsky, 1927/1982, p. 404, author's translation)

In a similar vein, what would POA and PCA afford us in terms of basic knowledge? Although rich in person-bound details they cannot compare with fiction writing (Brinkmann, 2009, Eco, 2009, Valsiner, 2009); still they win in the study of basic human developmental processes. Yet there is a twist – the human processes involve constant construction of signs-based novelty (Valsiner, 2014) at the personal-cultural level. So, the *basic human* psychological development is centered in the *personal* innovation of one's *unique* life course. Generalization becomes re-inserted into the never-ending particularities that are created as the person moves towards his or her future, from birth to death.

Persons function autonomously. As such each and every person needs to rely on some basic forms of relating with the *Umwelt*, and these forms can be studied on the basis of single specimens at a level of generality similar to that of studying conditional reflex properties in one single dog. This feature sets both the POA and PCS aside from the need to "generalize to a population", because the generalization here is about the *person's relations* in their abstract sense. By theoretically pre-defining these relationships in generic ways – for instance into harmonious, frictional, or conflictual – one can investigate the specifics of the profile of the relationships in any person at any stage of one's life course. The non-ergodicity of psychological phenomena – intra-individual variability is not isomorphic with inter-individual variability (Molenaar, Huizinga, & Nesselroade, 2002) – renders the use of cross-sectional samples moot for knowledge construction. Hence the person is in the center – both for POA and PCA.

Building the Person-Centered focus beyond Stern

What Stern overlooked in 1911 was the inherent context-boundedness of all developmental phenomena. He partly corrected his perspective in 1935 when his personological philosophy was brought to its completion (Stern, 1935, 1938). The person is in the center of relations between "inner" and "outer" infinities (Figure 2).

Surprisingly, Stern's personological scheme remained non-developmental – no time-bound transformation of the person into a new state is depicted in Figure 2. Furthermore, the precise process through which the two infinities feed into each other (see Figure 3) was not depicted in 1935. The dynamics of centrifugal and centripetal processes leads to a re-structuring of the present into a new present – based on negotiating the future possibilities with the reconstructed past (Zittoun and Valsiner, in press).

Figure 2. William Stern's personological perspective.

The person-centered focus of Stern had its developmental extension in the work of Heinz Werner (Valsiner, 2005). Werner's orthogenetic principle of developmental differentiation and hierarchical integration provides the time frame for Stern's focus on the negotiation of the two infinities (as seen in Figure 2). Yet it ended in an intellectual impasse of its own kind – demonstrating that the differentiation and hierarchical integration processes *exist* did not show how these processes *proceed*. The demonstration of microgenetic processes in the *recognition* of the meanings (Werner, 1931 p, 242 and the same example in Werner, 1956, p. 348) cannot be taken as examples of the emergence of a synthesis of new meanings in the orthogenetic process.

What happens as the person negotiates the inner and outer infinities? One needs to open the "black box" (of Figure 2). Figure 3 is an example of such an opening of the processes "in between." Extending Stern's ideas, it presumes the Gestalt nature of personal encounters with the external world (e.g. talk in terms of *forms*). The Gestalts that are moving – from outside towards inside, or from inside towards outside – meet in the person in his or her pre-

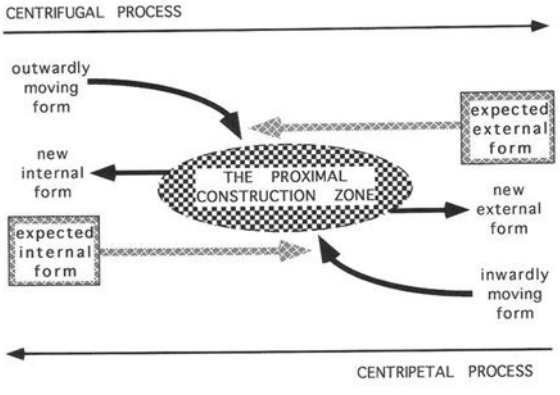

Figure 3. Inserting mutuality of processes into Stern's model (the person as the "construction site")

sent state of being, as *the person is the Gestalt-maker*. External forms become coordinated with the internal forms.

The results of such encounters are the making of new states ("new form") – both within the "internal" and "external" infinities (Figure 2). The human building of Taj Mahals and creating deeply emotional love poetry are examples of holistic constructions in both infinities – by persons, who leave these to their following generations.

Figure 4. Buddha's footprints (Gaillard, 1904, p. 10)

Consider an example from 19th century Chinese iconography (Figure 4) that is inundated with religious symbols of varied kinds – lotus flower, chakra, cross, swastika. Combining all these within the Buddhist symbolic image is an example of symbolic hybridization of meanings in the 19th century China. This formed object is encoded-engraved into the environment and exists as preserved cultural and religious value. Yet as a 21st century Occidental person is likely to incorporate it into one's Umwelt – into the near outwards zone in Stern's scheme (Figure 2), it establishes its role as Inwardly Moving Form (Figure 3) as part of detected "events" in the environment (Kharlamov, 2012). The person's acting upon that form – through Expected Internal Form – leads to negotiation of the personal sense of the image (in the Proximal Construction Zone). The tension between Expected External Forms (social imperative "swastika is forbidden for display") and Outwardly Moving Form ("I feel bad about that-what-I-see") guides the interpretation of the whole image in the Proximal Construction Zone. The externalization of the result (New External Form) may be an affective outburst of the kind:

> *"how could THEY* [who? Buddhists in China in 19th century?] *draw such a HORRIBLE symbol* [one that acquired such meaning only after 1933 and in Europe]!!"

The impact of such external outburst is an internal counterpart (New Internal Form) of a generalized affect of disgust – moving towards Internal Infinity.

This scenario of relating to Figure 4 as an example of a form that becomes related with – and hence becomes functional for the person – need not proceed along the path here described. A person of Oriental life-course background is likely to develop a relation with this symbolic object quite opposite to our hypothetical Occidentalist. Yet both extreme opposites are examples of the unique personal construction of the personal sense of the encounter through the universal processes that happen on the border of the person and the environment. What is generalizable is the abstract model of the process relations that can generate a large variety of ways to encounter the same multi-vocal symbolic object[6].

General Conclusions: The Person Comes Back – not as an Entity but as a Process Relation

The person is back in psychology. At least the establishment of this journal indicates that. So does the growing dissatisfaction in science with amassed data of no generalization value. Would the return of the person increase such pressure of "empirical data noise"? If accumulation were to be the goal, then probably indeed it could be that empirical focus on the variety of unique persons would reduce, rather than enhance, the generalizability of our evidence.

A solution might be in the recognition of the unity of highly abstract formal models and deeply context-bound empirical accounts of human relations with the specific niche of one's Umwelt. Such recognition entails the move of the research frame from inductive to abductive generalization. This would re-unite theoretical presuppositions with empirical research efforts, letting the research questions (rather than data collections) guide the questions that are meaningful to ask. Biological sciences that are confronted by a similar puzzle of high variability of living forms[7] and the need for abstract models that can show how such variability (and even more: possible new variations never seen before) is generated, have moved away from attributing causality to different parts of the biochemical system and treat generalized cyclical chains of processes as catalytic mechanisms[8]. Psychology awaits a similar innovation.

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[6] Note the flexibility of the adjustment of this system to the macro context. When tourists from Europe confront the variety of swastika-displaying scenes during their trips to the Orient they can "silence" their emergent intra-personal affective outbursts by techniques of psychological distancing.

[7] Including those that undergo self-modification – the puzzle for immunology.

[8] E.g. the "Krebs Cycle" is an example of real, cyclical, and abstracted model of a relationship structure.

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