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Personality as a Social Process: where Peter Giordano Meets Boris Parygin

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Abstract In this paper I comment on the “Individual personality is best understood as process, not structure: A Confucian-inspired perspective” article by Peter Giordano (*Culture & Psychology*, 23(4), 502–518 (2017)), which addresses the question of how to comprehend a personality which is continuously changing and varying with changes in social contexts and situations. The issue which Giordano turns up I believe to be of great importance and topicality in the quickly changing globalizing contemporary world. Giordano’s paper highlights an important problem in the development of contemporary personality psychology, but much remains to be clarified concerning his process-centric model. I introduce the theory of Boris Parygin, which can make a contribution to the discussion of personality as a process. Parygin’s theory addresses the same issues that Giordano focuses on: human personality exists and develops in the context of social situation. Parygin’s theoretical model of personality involves two personality schemas: a “static” one and a “dynamic” one. The “structure” and the “process”-centered approaches are joint here to complement each other. Personality life-span development, formation of personality structures, is considered as a process of interaction and dialectical confrontation with the social environment, in the course of which the personality, originally engendered by social factors, builds up its autonomy and realizes its unique individual spiritual potential.

Keywords Personality · Personality structure · Social interaction · Personality potential · Personality barrier · Boris Parygin

Introduction

Personality is changing like the weather, but in the same time is relatively stable, like the climate. Climate in its turn is only relatively stable, it changes over time, and weather observations help to reveal climate dynamics. Knowledge of climate

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parameters allows a probability to elucidate and predict the weather, i.e., to *understand* the weather, because what is understanding if not the possibility to explain what is happening and to make sensible predictions?

Giordano's paper "Individual personality is best understood as process, not structure: A Confucian-inspired perspective" (Giordano 2017) addresses the question of how to comprehend a personality which is continuously changing and varying with social contexts of situations. It's a matter of importance to draw attention of the international professional community to this issue, because, as Giordano rightly points, the "atomistic" approach, which is based on considering human personality and social context as initially separate entities is still domineering in the international personality and social psychology. Giordano's paper highlights an important problem in the development of contemporary personality psychology, but much remains to be clarified and I look forward to continuation of the discussion.

Some Questions on the Suggested Process-Centric Approach

Giordano focuses on what is *not* relevant to a "process-centric approach", aimed at *understanding individuals*, but what is *the right way* to this understanding remains unclear in his paper. He continuously claims that "making comparisons between individuals and groups" does not lead to "understanding individuals", and is not appropriate for investigating intra-personal dynamics and diversity. He constantly repeats: "...a being or substance ontology, is most useful for making between individual and group comparisons" (Giordano 2017, p. 502); "The structural perspective is matched to the methodology of individual or group comparisons" (Giordano 2017, p. 504); "...a structure-centric approach lends itself to making comparisons across persons and groups" (Giordano 2017, p. 505) ... Thus, Giordano summons us to share his belief, but no arguments are presented to prove that a) making comparisons across persons and groups is only relevant to structure-centric approach, and b) the structure-centric approach is only good for making comparisons. The structure-centric theorists, like those mentioned in the paper ("From Freud to Neo-Freudians, to ego psychologists and to object relations theorists.... Allport, Rogers, Bandura" (Giordano 2017, p. 503)) would hardly agree that their work results just in making comparisons between groups and individuals. They would rather claim for understanding personality in its dynamics and its development.

The proposed "process-centric model" is hardly explicated in the paper. No schemas of the phenomena under consideration are proposed, no research methods and procedures suggested, no previously inexplicable facts are explained, no verifiable hypotheses formulated. The author just intrigues us by his conclusion: "What we do know is that we can observe patterns of process that help us understand this particular individual in his or her always transitory contexts. These patterns of process, then, point to greater or lesser degrees of individual responsiveness to environmental contexts" (Giordano 2017, p. 514).

I look forward to know more of Giordano's model in the course of our discussion, because the issues which Giordano turns up I believe to be of great importance and topicality in the quickly changing globalizing contemporary world (Valsiner 2009, 2017), where "...centrality of human experiencing of culturally constructed worlds is restored as the core of psychological science" (Valsiner 2009, p.1).

Introducing the Theory of Boris Parygin

Meanwhile I'd like to expand our field of discussion, to introduce into the circle of issues discussed a theory hardly known to the majority of the international professional community, the theory of Boris Parygin, founder of the philosophical trend in Russian social psychology. This theory addresses the same issues that Giordano focuses on: human personality existence and development in the context of social situation.

Russian psychology is mainly known by the Activity Theory, which was its “mainstream” during the Soviet period. However, Soviet psychological science, along with the “mainstream”, included some “peripheral” trends, one of such was the philosophical social psychology by Parygin (Zhuravlev and Mironenko 2012; Zhuravlev and Mironenko 2015). Parygin's first monograph was published in 1965 (Parygin 1965), the last one in 2010 (Parygin 2010). Some of his works, but few, have been translated into foreign languages (Parygin 1964, 1967, 1968, 1975, 1976), but eventually they dropped out from the international science. It should be noted that Parygin was not a pure theoretician. His theoretical developments were born in the process of systematic and long-term empirical research. The theoretical models he proposed were tested with the participation of his students and the staff of the research teams he led at different times. In his empirical and applied studies Parygin primarily addressed the life of real working divisions and departments, engaged in scientific, engineering and technical work. For such real groups, methods of diagnosis, prediction and regulation of the “socio-psychological climate”, were developed, which earned good reputation in Soviet Russia (Parygin 1981, 1986).

Hopefully, some of his developments can make a contribution to our discussion.

Parygin and Giordano share the same vision of personality, conceiving the latter primarily as a being immersed in the context of social interactions and interrelations. We can say that these both are socio-psychological theories of personality. Psychological science abundance in the variety of interpretations of the concept of “personality”, which is due to the versatile and multi faced manifestations of this phenomenon in the subject field of psychology. Many theories of personality have been developed and many definitions proposed. Back in 1937, Gordon Allport in his book “Personality: Psychological Interpretation” (Allport 1937) presented more than 50 different definitions of personality. By now, their number has become incalculable, and it is highly unlikely that in the future any definition will become universally recognized. This is due to the richness and versatility of the phenomenon itself, which causes a naturally divergent growth of scientific discourse, which presupposes a complementarity relationship between different approaches (Mironenko 2006). This requires to clarify what we are talking about when we talk about personality.

Noting the variety of meanings of the concept of personality in psychology, Hjelle and Ziegler (1992) come to a generalization that most theoretical definitions contain the following general provisions:

- The concept of personality includes a social image, facing the societal surroundings.
- The concept of personality is inextricably linked with the concept of individuality, with the idea of individual differences between people. Special features, due to which a person differs from all other people are attributed to the personality.

- Personality is viewed as something that determines and organizes behavior. Personality is an abstraction based on conclusions derived from observation of human behavior.
- Personality is viewed as something that develops in the process of ontogenesis, on the basis of biological heredity and the influence of the environment, a fusion of the Nature and the Nurture.
- Personality is relatively stable, on-going and continual in time. It provides a constant inner sense of self in changing external circumstances (Hjelle and Ziegler 1992).

Any research approach focuses on one of these aspects of personality, and builds on its basis a theoretical model of the phenomenon, the rest are taken into consideration as much as those are necessary in the framework of this model. If you look at the examples from the Russian school in psychology, for Aleksei Leontyev, the founder of the Russian Activity Theory, personality is first of all something that determines and organizes behavior; The research of Boris Ananyev and his theoretical model focus on the formation of the individuality of personality, as a unique integrity (Mironenko 2013).

Starting his analysis of the problem of personality Parygin describes in detail the spectrum of existing approaches and proposes an integral definition of the phenomenon: “Personality is an integral concept that characterizes a person as an Objekt und Subjekt¹ of biosocial relations, including his universal, socially specific and individually unique characteristics” (Parygin 2010, p. 162). Thus, he does not consider personality as a certain substructure of human individual (what we can often see in psychological science), but, considering personality as an integral whole, he addresses in his research a certain aspect of it, focuses on it, considering the rest only in some measure. In the framework of the general concept of personality, Parygin as a social psychologist clearly defines his view angle and characterizes the differences of his approach from those of philosophy, sociology and general psychology. The focus of his attention is a person in the context of his social connections, interactions, social situations, the object and actor of social interactions and interrelations - “homo communicationis”.

Parygin’s theory grounds on two basic concepts, two psychological phenomena are basic for his reasoning: personality and social interaction (Parygin 1965, 1971, 1999, 2010).

His main assumptions are:

- Personality, on the one hand, has a certain stability and cross-situational constancy, and on the other - it is changeable and fluid, depending on the situation;
- Personality, on the one hand, is the procreation of social interactions in the course of socialization. On the other hand, the relations between personality and social surroundings are dialectical and contradictory, because personality has the greater autonomy, the higher the level of its development is. In social interactions personality pursues its own aims and follows its own value orientations.

Parygin’s attention is focused primarily on the intra-personal contradictions in the course of personality development and on the inter-personal contradictions, which arise

¹ Popular phrase in Russian psychological literature “объект и субъект” can be adequately translated into German: “Objekt und Subjekt”. The typical English translation “object and subject” fails to convey the meaning: the passive role of the former and the active role of the latter.

in the process of social interaction. His theoretical model of personality involves two different personality schemas: a “static” one and a “dynamic” one.

Static schema of personality is an abstract model, assessing the main aspects, main strata or components of the individual psyche. Static schema of personality is as far from the real manifestation of the latter in a certain situation as the theoretical model of climate is from the actual whether in the street. The static schema includes three major strata: 1) universal, comprising features which all humans have, 2) socially-specific, 3) individually unique. Thus, personality is assessed by Parygin as a joint problem of philosophy (the universal aspect), sociology (socially-specific characteristics), and psychology (individually unique psyche). Each of these three layers is further differentiated, dissected into components in Parygin’s writings.

His special interest is focused on formation of socially-specific characteristics of personality, which result from affiliation of the individual with a certain social group. Affiliation of an individual with a certain social group implies acceptance of a program of behavior: a system of requirements, rules, patterns of behavior, prescribed for the personality by the group. Socio-specific factors (group roles, norms, values and symbols) perform functions of regulation, control, authorization, they direct the behavior of the individual. The process of assimilation of social expectations Parygin divides into four stages. At the first, the individual receives the initial knowledge, the information about the requirements of society. At the next stage, socio-psychological stereotypes are acquired, positive or negative attitudes toward social norms and values. At the third stage, those are fixed. The final, the highest stage in the process of assimilation of social experience is the transition from conviction to motivation, denoting the willful effort necessary for the action. The degree of internalization of the individuals’ social experience can be different. Parygin defines two integral personality characteristics in relation to the social-specific expectations: the “position” of the individual and the self-consciousness.

Dynamic schema of personality. Personality as the unity of its interpersonal (the context of social interaction) and intrapersonal subjective individually-unique experience of existence is the center to which the main lines of analysis converge in the works of Parygin. The dynamic schema of personality assesses the personality, its mental state and behavior, in the context of the social situation. This schema is aimed to comprehend mechanisms of the joint functioning of all the structural strata of personality. The major feature of the dynamic schema of a personality, in contrast to the static one, is its confinement to a particular moment, a particular period of time during which a certain state of psyche or human activity can be observed.

Thus, two main aspects of the dynamic schema of the personality can be defined: the inner, the intrapersonal (relevant to the psychic state) and the external, the interpersonal (relevant to behavior). Both the external and the internal aspects can be either verbal (conscious) or non-verbal (unconscious).

Assessing the intrapersonal aspect of the dynamic personality schema, Parygin introduces the concept of a *personality psychic tuning* - an integral characteristic of personality psychic state at a given period of time, which performs the function of regulation of cognitive, emotional and motivational processes and behavior, bringing those into line with the situation. Personality *psychic tuning* is manifested, on the one

hand, by the unconscious emotional background, relative to the nonverbal psychic state, and on the other hand, by the mindset in relation to the verbal mental state.

An important place in the theory by Parygin is occupied by the concept of a *personality spiritual potential*, which turns up as a necessary complement to the idea of the dynamic schema of personality.

The *personality spiritual potential* is the amount of mental abilities (intellectual, emotional and volitional capacities) and inner energy, which the personality has, providing for its self-expression and self-affirmation. The spiritual potential never fully reveals itself and is never realized to the full extent of its power, because a system of personality socio-psychological barriers blocks personality self-expression in the situational context. These barriers also impinge personality development in general.

The main function of a socio-psychological barrier is the defense of personality from the threat of a devastating impact of the situation. Most of the mechanisms of psychological defense assessed by Freud and his adherents can act as socio-psychological barriers. They are aimed at reducing internal and external conflicts of personality and increasing the ability for social adaptation and self-regulation. However, while protecting personality against internal conflicts and external influences, the barrier simultaneously inhibits, restrains and freezes emotional and intellectual responsiveness and activity of personality.

Psychological barrier limits or even interrupts the connection of the individual with his social environment in the context of a stressful situation. The price for such defense may be not only the inhibition of certain abilities of the individual, but also interruption of the entire life activity and personality development. A huge gap between enormous potential for personality self-realization and modest life achievements is conditioned by a system of psychological barriers. A certain habitual psychological state or pattern of behavior rooted in personality character can serve as a barrier. Thus, a person prone to increased self-criticism and low self-esteem, constantly doubting his abilities, most often can be a victim of psychological barrier of unnecessary stiffness and constraint, which hinder the realization of his potential. The danger of the transformation of barriers into a system completely blocking personality development, is determined by the range and types of psychological barriers.

The main contradiction between the individual and his social surroundings in the contemporary society, according to Parygin, is the growing gap between, on the one hand, the increasing potential of the new objective capabilities of man as a subject of activity (new technologies) and the steadily decreasing level of personality psychological readiness to master these new conditions of living and to actualize personality potential. He argued that the main psychological problem of contemporary humans, living in the world of mass-media and multiple standards, is the problem of self-identification, necessary to develop self-governing and autonomy.

Conclusions

The focus on social life of personality unites Parygin with Peter Giordano, but unlike Giordano he did not make a special focus and dwell on the difference between the individual-oriented and variable-(population)-oriented approaches as a methodological problem, considering these approaches as complementary. Perhaps, the importance of

this problem, topical in contemporary discourse, f.ex., (Uher 2015), has not yet manifested itself within the time frame and paradigmatic context of his work.

In Parygin's work the "structure" and the "process" –centered approaches are joint to complement each other. Personality development, formation of personality structures, is considered as a process of interaction and dialectical confrontation with the social environment, in the course of which the personality, originally engendered by social factors, builds up its autonomy and realizes its unique individual spiritual potential. The posing of the problem of personality as an interdisciplinary one, laying at the junction of the fields of philosophy, sociology and psychology, also consonants with Giordano's vision.

It is important that Parygin's theory not only presupposes changes of personality, of its psychological state and behavior, in line with the situation. In line with Giordano's vision, Parygin considers personality as an entity, which is in the state of becoming. Personality development is assessed as the ascent from the assimilation of social patterns to autonomy and self-fulfillment and self-realization.

Giordano appeals to the ideas of Confucianism. It is pertinent to note that although in the Soviet period Parygin masterfully cited the classics of Marxism-Leninism, which was a necessary prerequisite for the social sciences, he was not a Marxist. Being a philosopher by his education, he deeply knew and highly appreciated the Russian Christian Philosophy of the late 19th - early twentieth century: Berdyaev, Solovyov, Lossky, with its characteristic focus on the problem of the freedom of will of the individual and personal responsibility. His philosophical orientations and grounds were fully explicated in his late monographs [1999; 2010].

I believe that Parygin's theoretical models can make a contribution to the highly topical discussion of the problem of social contextuality of personality raised in Giordano's paper.

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