



# Psychology: a Discipline in Need of Reflective Foundations

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Published online: 1 June 2020

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## Abstract

Zagaria, Andó and Zennaro (2020) provide a useful analysis of the current state of affairs in the discipline of psychology. They conclude that psychology is in a messy and unproductive pre-pragmatic state and suggest that evolutionary psychology can provide a needed metatheoretical perspective to enable psychology to move forward as a science. In my commentary I move to another direction and suggest that psychology does not need more solid foundations, but rather foundations characterized by reflective stance towards its phenomena, theories, methods and data production processes. I suggest that this kind of stance would be in accordance with the process ontological perspective that allows focusing on meaningful human experience as central object of study for psychology, together with an idiographic approach to research. I thus suggest that psychology will endure only by turning its reflective gaze towards oneself, by thinking about its past, imagining its future and constructing novelty from the creative assemblage of the two.

**Keywords** Psychology · Human experience · Meaning making · Process ontology · Idiographic science

## Introduction

In their target article Zagaria et al. (2020) suggest that psychology as a science is in trouble. Its object of study is not clearly defined and there is no consensus about the content and definition of its core concepts. Such a pre-paradigmatic state, Zagaria, Andó and Zennaro suggest, is hampering the development of the discipline, as the rivalry between different schools of thought with their competing and unclear theorizations of key concepts makes it difficult to create a common and original research program. They also suggest that psychology needs a metatheory that would bring the

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various strands of research and schools of thought together and through that allow the discipline to escape this messy pre-paradigmatic state and start moving towards a state of being a solid science with clear foundations and a well-formulated direction. They see evolutionary psychology as providing an opportunity for creating such a metatheoretical perspective for psychology as a science.

The issues raised by Zagaria et al. (2020) have been articulated before (see for example Toomela and Valsiner 2010). Yet their concerns continue to be valid, for despite the many and frequent criticism about the current state of affairs in the psychological science, the fragmentation and isolation within the discipline has not disappeared (see also Toomela 2020). In this commentary, however, I am not going to dwell upon the issue of fragmentation and need for a unified metatheoretical approach that would allow the discipline to escape its current unfortunate condition. Nor am I going to analyze whether evolutionary psychology is the best candidate for this metatheoretical perspective. In fact, I am not going to join Zagaria and colleagues in their suggestion to re-launch the project of building a psychology on solid foundations at all. Instead I will follow Brown and Stenner (2009), who suggest that psychology needs different kind of foundations altogether, foundations that are not similar to the solid and strong physical foundations of a house that can support the material structure over time, but rather foundations that are similar to the cells of an organism that are continuously able to renew and ‘rebuild themselves whilst retaining their identity over time’ (p. 3). In other words, I will suggest that the foundations of psychology do not need to be seen as something fixed, such as a system of clearly defined and agreed upon concepts, but instead the fundamental relationality and self-referentiality of psychological phenomena needs to be placed at the center of any consideration of the foundations of the discipline (see also Brinkmann 2020). In order to make this suggestion, I will consider three interrelated topics in this commentary: meaning making as central to human experience, relational process ontology as the conceptual basis of psychology and the focus on single cases as the basis of empirical work within the discipline.

## Psychology as a Science of Human Meaning Making

What does it mean to be a person? Many historical and contemporary psychologists would see this as a central question for the discipline of psychology (see for example Danziger 1990; Stenner 2017; Valsiner 1998). Elsewhere I have suggested that from the semiotic cultural perspective the answer to this question would make a reference to a subjective being who experiences the life in a meaningful manner (Märtsin 2019). Yet experience and meaning making are not the psychological phenomena that Zagaria and colleagues focus on when assessing the current condition of psychological science. Instead they look at how psychologists have tried to define and failed to agree about the definitions of such concepts as behavior, soul, consciousness and a range of cognitive functions. For me, Zagaria, Andó and Zennaro’s discussion points to the dichotomy between mind and matter that has haunted the discipline of psychology since its inception. It points to the lack of recognition that subjectivity cannot be separated from nature, but rather the person who is experiencing the world and making sense of it, is a material and embodied, as well as psychological and cultural being all at once. By failing to move beyond the mind-matter dichotomy, Zagaria, Andó and Zennaro miss

the peculiarity and uniqueness of psychology's object of study. In my view it is not that psychologists are less capable than scientists from other disciplines in defining their core concepts or reaching a consensus about their definitions. It is rather that the central phenomenon of the psychological inquiry – meaningful life experience – is notoriously difficult to grasp, let alone define, for it loses its meaning when removed from the original context in which it emerged (Brown and Stenner 2009). In other words, psychological phenomena escape the psychologists' attempts to grasp them and fix them into definitions that cover the phenomena in its wholeness (Valsiner 2017). Instead, the definitions always simplify the phenomenon, in some cases kill it altogether, leaving the poor psychologists unable to appropriately describe the complexity and diversity of their object of study.

But what does it mean to focus on the meaningful life experience as the central concern for psychological investigation? First, this kind of focus requires recognition that psychological phenomena cannot be separated from the whole that they are part of, but this relationality within and between wholes needs to be maintained when defining and conceptualizing psychological phenomena. In other words, it requires recognition that 'things' do not exist independently from one another, but instead are defineable only through relations to one another. Salvatore (2018), writing from the perspective of semiotic cultural psychology, underlines this relationality in the case of human meaning making:

A sign is something that stands for something else, with such a relation having to be interpreted by a further sign (Peirce 1932). Thus, a sign does not have an inherent content; rather it acquires its value owing to the transition of which it is a part, that is, the capacity to refer to "something else" as defined by another sign – and so on, in an infinite chain. (Salvatore 2018, p. 42, original emphasis)

Signs can thus be seen as products of the ongoing process of interpretation of previous signs in an infinite chain of semiosis. In other words, meanings that persons create about their experiences are not 'things' to be described or uncovered, but rather they are local and temporary states of the whole semiotic dynamic, created in the process of meaning making. Yet the relations between signs that give them their content, do not appear in a random fashion. Instead, the process of semiosis is guided by the culture that provides a framework for meaning making, a set of scenarios or semiotic universes (Salvatore et al. 2019) that guide the emergence of certain kinds of interpretations out of all the possible interpretations. And just like a passage through the woods becomes created through its repeated use, so the scenarios that favor certain kinds of interpretations become stronger and increasingly more salient through their use.

Consider for example a case of a single mother of two who has to work from home during the COVID-19 crisis and therefore relies heavily on screens as babysitters. For an outsider she is doing a fantastic job managing this difficult situation so resourcefully. But when reading the Facebook posts of her friends who do all kinds of 'fun stuff' with their kids and keep themselves busy with activities 'they never had time for', she starts to feel increasingly stressed and the culturally suggested image of a 'good mother' that she has previously used to make sense of her own experiences, starts to slip away from her, influencing her identity making and motherhood beyond the extraordinary situation in which she

finds herself. In this way the culture guides the meaning making of a person, while her meaning making feeds back into the workings of a culture, making certain scenarios dominant. The meanings created by the person about her life experiences are thus fundamentally relational, existing only within the chain of semiosis and its cultural guidance.

Second, as is probably already becoming clear from the discussion so far, the shift to meaningful life experience as the main object of psychological investigation, does not only require alternative ontological assumptions in relation to space as just described through the idea of relationality (Brown and Stenner 2009). It also requires similar shifts in relation to temporality and thus a clear focus on process instead of stasis:

Things do not exist independently of temporality and process, rather things are constituted by events that occurred in the immediate past and by what will occur in the immediate future. To put it bluntly, everything that exists now in the world emerges from the past and is a potential for whatever will come to exist in the future (Brown and Stenner 2009, p. 38).

To translate this into the language of semiotic cultural psychology, meaning emerges as a sign is placed in a relation to another sign that had emerged earlier, and thus carries in it the history of its relations with other earlier signs. Yet while carrying with it the past and the history, the meaning is also pregnant with the possible meanings that could be created in the future – in the future where signs that carry this meaning can be placed in relation to other signs in a new and alternative way. The experience of not being a ‘good mother’ because she allows her kids to use screens excessively, for example, goes beyond this mother’s interpretation of the current situation and creates a potential trajectory for her as a certain kind of mother into the future. Process ontology is thus not simply an opposite of things, states and content, but rather a recognition that psychological phenomena are always at the border between past and future between what they have already been and what they are becoming (Valsiner 2017). They are always fuzzy and ambiguous and this ambiguity builds the basis for creativity, difference and possibility for things to become otherwise (Märtsin 2020). It follows from this that the focus of psychological investigation and for creating the foundations for the psychology as a discipline should not be on states and conditions that have already emerged, but on those that are in the process of becoming, in other words, on the emergence of novelty (Stenner 2017).

## Psychology as Idiographic Science

The relational process ontology briefly discussed above has several important implications for the methodology of psychology as a discipline (see Valsiner 2017 for in-depth discussion on this issue). In this commentary I will briefly mention only one of these that seems to be most relevant in light of the arguments put forward by Zagaria et al. (2020). Namely, I will suggest that as meaningfulness can only be understood from the perspective of a meaning maker, i.e. a single person, psychology should be seen primarily as an idiographic science.

Just as the interest and theoretical elaboration concerning the relational process ontology within psychology has re-emerged in recent decades, so has the interest in idiographic approach to research (Abbey and Surgan 2012; Flyvberg 2001; Gomm et al. 2009; Yin 2003; Zittoun 2017). A clear and persuasive objection towards using nomothetic approach in psychological research that focuses on inter-individual variation and aims to make generalisations based on a sample to population, has been put forward by Molenaar (2004). Drawing on laws of mathematics he suggests that the structure of inter-individual variation is the same as the structure of intra-individual variation only in case of ergodic processes that are rarely found when psychological phenomena are considered (Molenaar and Valsiner 2005). According to Valsiner (2017): “Ergodicity is a mathematical characteristic of systems where the average of a synchronically derived sample average is considered to be equal to the average derived from the same phenomenon over time” (p. 35). This, however, does not seem to describe psychological phenomena, that are developmental in nature and vary in time. Therefore, the differences among individuals at any given moment in time (i.e., inter-individual variability) that are described by a typical nomothetic study, are not informative for understanding the changes in individuals’ functioning during the life-course (i.e., intra-individual variability). Based on this mathematical reasoning, Molenaar suggests that idiographic approaches that focus on detailed analysis of single cases, should be utilised in order to understand time-dependent psychological processes.

As discussed before, the meanings created by persons about their experiences do not set up one clear trajectory for future meaning making and conduct, but rather meanings contain in themselves potentials, they set up a range of possibilities for meaning making out of which one becomes actualized in the complex interplay between persons’ meaning making and the cultural guidance (Bastos 2017). Ambivalence is an important characteristic of human meaning making, paving the way for novelty and development (Abbey 2012). The future trajectory of our single mother of two who struggles to see herself as a ‘good mother’ during the period of crisis, unfolds in the future in relation to new experiences and opportunities and cannot be predicted or known with certainty based on the experiences that she herself and other women like her have had in the past. Humans are future-oriented beings who have an important resource – imagination – at their disposal (Cangià and Zittoun 2020). They construct scenarios for their conduct and images about themselves in the future and start to then act in the name of these scenarios and images in order to turn what was imagined into reality or to avoid that which was imagined. And here lies the reason why no single person can successfully recognize themselves in the described sample averages yielded by a nomothetic research. Instead what psychology can focus on is the unique meaningful experience that refers to a unique context where all these imagined and real, past, present and future scenarios and experiences are brought together and made sense of. In other words, it is this in-depth analysis of single cases that give us glimpses into what it means to be a person.

## In Conclusion

Brown and Stenner (2009) have written: “Good foundations are important since they permit whatever is founded upon them to continue its existence in time: *to endure*” (p.

21, original emphasis). In this commentary I have taken inspiration from Zagaria et al.'s (2020) interesting stock taking about the state of affairs in psychological science, to suggest that what psychology as a discipline needs in order to endure is not necessarily a clearer and more solid foundations, but rather foundations that are altogether different. I have suggested that psychology as a discipline needs to return to the focus on meaningful human experience as its central object of study and argued that this can be done by building upon relational process ontology and seeing psychology as first and foremost an idiographic science.

Yet using the relational process ontology as the basis of psychological investigation does not necessarily mean that we should use it only to conceptualise psychological phenomena, but rather that we should use it also to make sense of the discipline of psychology itself. In other words, a science at the heart of which is an emergent and elusive object of study, one that escapes the attempts to be pinned down and defined conclusively, is a discipline whose foundations should also be seen as always in the flux and in need of continuous reflection. So the reflective gaze of the psychologist should be turned towards every aspect of psychological investigation: psychological phenomena, theories, methods, the position of the researcher, and data and its production. In this way, psychology should be seen as an abductive enterprise – one where the uniqueness of subjective experiences reveals the underlying general psychological processes that can be understood through ‘educated intuition’, creative insights and continuous reflection of the researcher (Valsiner 2017; Zittoun 2017).

Psychology thus emerges not as a giant who stands firmly on solid feet made of something less malleable than clay, as Zagaria et al. (2020) suggest, but rather as a giant whose flexible feet are always on the move. It emerges as a careful traveler, always considering where it has already been, where to go next and how to best get there. For it is by thinking about its past, imagining its future and constructing novelty from the creative assemblage of the two, that this self-reflective giant will endure.

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