

Book Reviews

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An Old Debate but Still Alive, Fruitful and Able to Renew Itself: The Language in Psychology Between the Particular and the Universal

Book Review of “Making Sense of Infinite Uniqueness: The Emerging System of Idiographic Science”

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The volume “Making Sense of Infinite Uniqueness”, released by the editors Salvatore, Gennaro, and Valsiner (2013), continues the path of research, discussion and redefinition of idiographic science focusing now attention to the issue of *language*. The various worldwide contributors to this book examine the role of language in the psychological research, both in the field of Cultural Psychology, Social Psychology and Clinical Psychology. The book presents a multitude of perspectives for research and interesting theoretical and methodological discussions.

The debate between the idiographic sciences and nomothetic sciences is far from resolved and closed. It is alive, thriving and innovative. It started in the second half of the 19th century within the classical and historical opposition between the "Science of Nature" - Naturwissenschaften - and the "Science of the Spirit" - Geisteswissenschaften. According to Dilthey, the Geisteswissenschaften produces knowledge through understanding and insight while Naturwissenschaften generates knowledge through explanation. In this philosophical and epistemological scenario, in 1904, Windelband introduces the contrast between knowledge construction that emphasizes the general (nomothetic) and that which focuses on the particular (idiographic).



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Psychology as a discipline experienced a difficult negotiation between these two poles. The current interest in this issue is not a mere exercise in historiography but one of the starting points in order to revitalize the theoretical, epistemological and methodological debate in psychology which, in the current mainstream of the discipline, gives up more and more the subjective and particular aspect of human experience in its becoming over time. This aim of recovering a long tradition is alive in the intents, in the reflections and discussions of the YIS (Yearbook of Idiographic Science) editorial project. The focus of the present volume is *language*.

Language is far from a way of assembling words and terms, far from an already provided and pre-established code. Language is a process through which the human being makes more complex its experience with the world and with others.

Language is a way to become a subject; it is a way to make discrete units within the continuous flow of experience; it is a way to be in relationship with others. Language is also the way in which the human being explores its capacity to know and expand the products of knowledge. As such, language – in this volume – is proposed both as a *process* and as a *tool*, being both the "*how*" and the *product* of all human activity (which always has a symbolic, relational and cultural matrix). In this way, language assumes a crucial position in the epistemological debate because it clearly highlights that there is a continuous, never-ending and unresolved dialectic between instances of uniqueness and generalization.

This issue raises the need to problematize language and not to treat it as a spontaneous human activity, namely the purposes of the book is to make language a problematic instrument of investigation and research and not a simple and objective communication tool.

The language is the focus far from easy of the idiographic debate in this volume. This focus animates the reflections and research efforts of many authors, from all over the world, who participated in the volume. From different psychological perspectives, they deal with the issues of communication (section II), with intervention (section III), and research methodologies (section IV).

As previously mentioned, language in the modern idiographic debate captures a continuous tension between the possibility to generalize and the need to grasp the uniqueness of psychological phenomena. An idiographic approach to knowledge does not limit the ability to produce models of general knowledge, indeed, it allows and encourages their construction through in-depth studies of a single case which is caught in its temporal development.

Between the mode of deductive knowledge and that of inductive knowledge, there is a third way (defined aptly by Peirce), the way of abductive logic, that triggers a process of new knowledge construction through the generation of hypotheses and models ready to be verified. The reflection of Salvatore and Valsiner is an interesting contribution to the development of idiographic epistemology which does not renounce the contextuality and contingency of any psychological phenomenon.

The authors' proposal to use the neologism "*individext*" has to be carefully considered. There is never an isolated absolute individual but always and only an individual who discloses him/herself in a relational, contextual dynamic. Therefore the individual lives in a process of continuous transformation, change and development over time.

According to the authors, *individext* is a theoretical-methodological construct and not an empirical one. It is proposed as an analysis unit. The *individext* is also the critical response to the theorem of ergodicity (according to which a

specimen is assumed to be homogeneous in some respects – the ones of interest to the research purposes – to all the other members of the sample).

In this perspective, the opposition between idiographic and nomothetic approaches does not translate into an opposition between qualitative and quantitative. In this volume, we find several possibilities to observe, as the idiographic approach represents a way of producing knowledge through the study of a single case and being able to construct general models based on it. According the authors, the idiographic approach can be both qualitative and quantitative. The importance of this approach takes place through the consideration that every science is idiographic in its relationship to the phenomena under investigation, but it is also nomothetic because it is always focused on theoretical assumptions that define a phenomenon.

Therefore, the use of the average and the bell-curve distribution in the case of a population have different risks of hypostatization for the studied phenomenon, that is, of confirming what is already known – namely, the qualities and aspects pre-assumed by the researcher. This approach does not produce new knowledge.

The “*particular*” must not be hypostatized as certain, timeless and static knowledge but as a phenomenal dimension that develops in time, within the multiple relations of a field. The point of view advanced by Salvatore and Valsiner is that switching from point-like signs to generalized abstract fields allows us to have a wider and more dynamic perspective on psychological processes, considering them in their temporal, contextual and relational nature.

Based on these theoretical and epistemological premises, *communication* – the topic of the second section of the volume – is questioned and addressed by a series of clinical perspectives and methodological analyses in which there is a great deal of attention to the multiplicity of points of view, the multidimensionality of sense-making processes and the action of reality-making processes through the dialogical intra-inter-subjective dynamic.

Language takes on an interesting structuring function. It reproduces itself in a hierarchical poly-semiotic embodied process and yet it reconfigures itself from moment to moment, depending on context. In the third section of the volume, concerned with *intervention*, this characteristics of flexibility, plasticity and variability are grasped as opportunities for clinical intervention, taking advantage of possibilities for innovation and expansion of the meaning-making process.

From the point of view of the idiographic methodologies to the study of language (section IV), the field seems still in need of development. The analysis models proposed in the book, to address this need, are very interesting. The focus is on how to produce generalization through the study, observation and analysis of “linguistic peculiarities”. Section IV includes contributions dealing with the growth of the dynamic analysis of meaning through multimodal assemblage models.

Ultimately, according to the author of this review, this volume is very informative because it shows how the use of language presents both great variability over time and a tendency towards regularity – similar to what is the case for an open biological system. In fact, the language process always emerges as a function of situativity and contextuality, through a deep cultural relationality on which intersubjectivity is based. On these assumptions, every methodology and every form of analysis – quantitative and qualitative – should be addressed and considered.

The invitation to take into consideration this volume is well founded on the commitment of all the authors to reflect on and discuss the sense-making process as a never-ending open system in which language recursively meets with other semiotic codes, resulting in semiotic complex hierarchical organizations with different levels of general-

ization. The theoretical and methodological proposals that originate in this important book can no longer be overlooked.