

DISCUSSION PAPER FOR June 1, 2016 seminar on CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY OF PERSONALITY

Individual Personality is Best Understood as Process, Not Structure

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Abstract. A structural approach to understanding personality, which is rooted in a Being or substance ontology, is most useful for making between individual and group comparisons. In contrast, a process-centric approach, which is anchored in a Becoming or event-based ontology, is most helpful for understanding *individual* personality process and variation. A process-centric model has a number of advantages in that it (a) integrates persons and situations, (b) implies an aesthetic dimension to personality development and functioning, (c) focuses on the uniqueness of individual personalities, (d) views qualitative and quantitative inquiry as complementary and of equal scientific value, and (e) emphasizes the need for intra- and inter-disciplinary collaborations.

Keywords: Personality structure, personality process, qualitative inquiry, person-specific analyses, Being ontology, Becoming ontology, classical Confucianism

Understanding persons has been a chief task of humans since they became self-conscious and first began drawing on cave walls or telling stories around a fire. But what started out as drawings and stories has evolved into one of the most complex domains of scientific inquiry. How do we understand persons, not in aggregated groups but as individuals themselves? And, to what degree can we predict what a *single* person might do in the future? These are the questions that haunt personality psychologists, because we are not very good at understanding intra-individual process and variation.

Part of the challenge is the nature of the object of study. “Personality” is incorporeal and, to a degree, ephemeral. These characteristics create challenges for scientific study. One solution to this problem is to abandon the scientific quest altogether, throw up our hands, and say we cannot study individual personality with the methods of empirical science (see Smedslund, 2016). Philosophers and novelists are better at doing this, so let’s leave it them.

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Another solution is to essentialize and reify personality and study it as we study any other phenomenon in the natural world. The former approach is obviously a non-solution, and the latter is useful for making inter-person and inter-group *comparisons*. It falls short, however, if our aim is to understand the uniqueness of any one person.

As I have argued elsewhere (Giordano, 2015), this current situation has created a predicament or impasse (Hershock, 1996), which requires a new way of thinking about individual personality. This paper will argue that one way to work through this predicament is first to be clear about the scientific goals for personality study and then to adopt an appropriate perspective to pursue these goals. If the goal is to make individual and group comparisons, then a structural understanding of personality has merit. If the scientific objective is to understand within-person variation then a structural approach to personality impedes progress. To appreciate intra-individual personality process and variation, personality psychologists should adopt a perspective that conceptualizes personality in terms of open-system, dynamic, and fluid *processes*. In short, resolving this predicament will require a shift in thinking because we are so accustomed to understanding human personality within a structural framework.

The Case for Personality Structure

A structural conception of personality has been the dominant theoretical perspective, at least in Western approaches and in contemporary scientific psychology. A brief survey of personality theorizing within the last century highlights this emphasis. From Freud to Neo-Freudians, to ego psychologists and to object relations theorists, the structural approach is apparent. Although these theorists invoke ideas of psychodynamics and change, the structural interplay is the source of the dynamics. Further, although a personality structure such as an “ego” may evolve over time, the structure itself is seen as relatively stable and is of chief theoretical concern.

Even perspectives that endorse at least some processual ideas (e.g., Allport, Rogers, Bandura) adhere to discrete personality entities such as the “proprium” or “self” or “self-system.” These discrete “selves” are not identical across theorists, but they share the feature of being organizing *structural centers* of personality. They are actors within the actor or the “me” at the center of experience (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

The most recent and dominant iteration of a structural understanding of personality is the Five Factor Model (McCrae, 2011, McCrae & Costa, 1996, 1997). As is well known, this perspective construes personality as comprised of varying strengths of the five robust factors (traits) obtained via factor analytic procedures. Taxonomic in its orientation, the Five Factor Model represents an apex in structural thinking, and has proven powerful in generating a large volume of empirical research (McCrae & Costa, 2008), focusing in particular on comparisons between groups and individuals.

As a rule, structural approaches locate personality within individuals and in terms of discrete entities such as traits, dispositions, selves, egos, and so on. The advantage of structure-centric explorations is that they are a powerful means of establishing comparative analyses. If the goal of scientific inquiry is to make such comparisons or to answer questions of a comparative nature, then a structural model is appropriate. The structural perspective is matched to the methodology of individual or group comparisons (Uher, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

The Ontological Context of Structure-Centric Thinking

As with any theoretical perspective on personality, a structure-centric model evolves within an ontological context. The philosophical foundation of a structural understanding of personality is rooted in the Being ontology of Western culture. A Being or substance ontology (Ames, 2011, 2015; Giordano, 2015) is the dominant Western world view deriving from the classical Greek philosophers of 2500 years ago. From the perspective of a Being ontology, the world we move about in consists of fixed entities or essences that are substantive, static, at rest, and (relatively) permanent. It is no accident, then, that the prevailing models of persons that have developed in Western culture reflect this way of thinking – the *autonomous* rational self that is the backbone of Western cultural experiencing. If you are a Westerner, this approach is common sense and typically not open to question – it simply reflects the nature of things.

Funder (1991) offered a clear articulation of this philosophical position, which is foundational to a structure-centric understanding of personality. Funder asserted that “traits are real” and then, citing Allport, explained:

“This assertion is the most fundamental of Allport's assumptions, one he believed was essential for subsequent research to be meaningful. He held this position in the face of objections that it was philosophically naive and arguments (still heard today) that traits should be regarded not as entities that have objective reality, but merely as hypothetical constructs (Carr & Kingsbury, 1938). Allport believed that this idea made about as much sense as astronomers regarding stars as hypothetical constructs rather than astronomical objects. He failed to see how any science, including personality psychology, could proceed without assuming its subject of study to be real. More specifically, Allport (1931, 1966) said traits are ‘neurodynamic structures’ (1966, p. 3) that have ‘more than nominal existence’ (1966, p. 1).” (p. 32).

That Funder and Allport are incorrect is *not* what I am arguing. I cite this passage here to make explicit the ontological position that underlies their structure-centric understanding of personality. Traits are real, however, in a different sense than celestial objects are real. The former are not directly observable, whereas the latter are, and to assert that traits are “real” is to reify them. A trait is not a material “thing” any more than constructs like happiness, love, or justice are material. The reification of traits may be useful and may help organize observations and inform group-level comparisons and predictions, but traits are not “real” in any material sense.

Again, the central issue is not that reification is inherently mistaken; it is, however, important to recognize it when it happens. Gould (1981) reminded us of this issue in making a compelling case for the risks of the reification of intelligence, particularly in Charles Spearman's early factor analytic work on intelligence. The search for and “discovery” of the g factor by Spearman, Gould argued, was in response to the “physics envy” (p. 292) of psychologists. “With g as a quantified, fundamental particle,” Gould wrote, “psychology could take its rightful place among the real sciences.” (p. 293). The parallels with contemporary personality theorizing are clear.

To be fair, in the next paragraph of the article cited above, Funder (1991) softened his position when he observed that traits are “a complex pattern of *behavior* from which *the trait is inferred*” (p. 32, italics mine), thereby highlighting the inferential process of moving from the observable to the unobservable world.

But here is an important caveat. Thus far in this discussion I have simplified things. As we will see shortly, there are Western thinkers who have emphasized a Becoming (process-centric) ontology over a Being perspective. My point at this juncture is that a structural understanding of persons and personality derives from an ontological world view that privileges fixed and distinct entities over dynamic and fluid processes. Further, a structure-centric approach lends itself to making *comparisons across persons and groups*. There are many important practical applications of this enterprise. For example, in an employment setting, I may wish to compare Job Applicant A to Job Applicant B, as I evaluate their applications. Depending on the particular demands of the job, I may wish to hire A over B because A is more agreeable than B. Or, for another job, I may hire B over A, because B is comparatively more conscientious than A. As another example, in studying political issues in the United States, it might be interesting to compare conservatives and progressives on any number of personality dimensions. In this case, these data could be utilized to predict who might vote for whom in an election, or aggregated differences could be used to craft and then target television advertisements with greater persuasive power. In these situations, the case can be made that a structural understanding of personality is most appropriate.

The Case for Personality Process

The above examples, as important as they are in a practical sense, only capture a thin slice of what is most compelling about human personality. Of greater interest to many personality psychologists is the development of effective models for understanding the uniqueness of individuals, *as individuals*. In this vein, Jack Block (2010) observed, “At one time, at least as I understood the quest, personality psychology aspired to understanding the dynamics of *intraindividual* [italics mine] functioning; it was not just the study of individual differences, of which there can be no end.” (p. 22).

Block’s (2010) assertion underscores the dilemma for personality psychologists. The case for studying personality processes or, rather, *conceptualizing* personality in terms of processes (not structures), is that a process-centric approach helps focus attention on individual personality function and on the unique adjustments of the individual over time. A process-centric approach moves discussion away from between-individual and between-group comparisons and toward an understanding of within-person process and variation and their transformations from moment to moment. In so doing, we match theoretical and empirical objectives to the appropriate locus of inquiry, the individual person (Valsiner, 1986; Uher, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c).

Beyond these practical considerations, too, a process-centric approach entails a fundamental shift in how we think about individual personalities. The importance of this shift is that it helps resolve the predicament or impasse (Hershock, 1996) that I mentioned earlier. In making this transition we move away from a Being and toward a Becoming ontology.

An Historical Context of Personality Process

The Becoming ontology of the East. A Becoming ontology construes the world, including persons, in terms of transition, change, impermanence, emergence, and novelty (Ames, 2015). Rather than emphasizing the stasis and structure of a Being ontology, a Becoming world view underscores impermanence and process. In contrast to the dominant philosophical trends in Western culture, Chinese and other East Asian cultures evolved within a Becoming sensibility, dating back at least 2500 years to the classical Confucian period in mainland China. For a person enculturated in the West, a Becoming ontology may be difficult to apprehend, but in the East this processual, correlative, or event based cosmology (Ames, 2011, 2015) is common sense.

Just as a Being ontology informs conceptions of persons in the West, so does the Becoming ontology in the East. Rather than locating personality structures inside the person, for example, a Becoming world view “locates” personality *between* persons and anchors it in the always dynamic, contextual processes of *interpersonal relations*. This difference in person construal has been labeled as the independent or autonomous self (West) and the interdependent or relational self (East) (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). More significant than these two self-construals, however, is the ontology that supports them.

A key idea embedded in the notion of the interdependent self is not only that it is relational (which it is), but that it is inherently particularistic and contextual. Even to describe the relational self as a “self” or as “it” is, to a degree, misleading. The label of a processual, transitory, or always-emergent “self” is more apropos, as it does a better job of expressing a Becoming ontology. Even better, perhaps we should refer to a self-in-process, personality-in-process, or personality-ing (Giordano, 2015), so as to underscore a processual or event based ontology. Personalities, in this sense, are not only unique across persons, but also within the person over time. Novelty and emergence are central to describing and understanding a particular person at this moment and in every other moment going forward. Personality changes with the context, or at least it *should* change with the context as a mark of healthy personality functioning. To be static is to be unresponsive to the context and therefore, to some degree, dysfunctional. If the personality does not adjust to the emerging context, then the personality is not functioning optimally, a point to which we shall return later.

A Becoming ontology in Western psychology. As I have already mentioned, a strict East-West dichotomy on these ontological issues is not fair. Almost two decades ago, Hermans and Kempen (1998) “criticized the psychological tradition of cultural dichotomies as representing cultures as internally homogeneous and externally distinctive.” (p. 1119). This point is significant. Their argument is even more salient today as globalization and trans-cultural integration continue to accelerate. It is important to recognize that although Being and Becoming ontologies have their own cultural histories, they are not mutually exclusive. Strict dichotomization should be avoided.

To illustrate, a Becoming orientation is found in Western thinkers, most notably in the philosophical pragmatism of George Herbert Mead and John Dewey.

Here I quote Mead at length from portions of *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934):

“There are all sorts of different selves answering to all sorts of different social reactions. It is the social process itself that is responsible for the appearance of the self; it is not there as a self apart from this type of experience.” (p. 142).

“The self is not so much a substance as a process in which the conversation of gestures has been internalized within an organic form. This process does not exist for itself, but is simply a phase of the whole social organization of which the individual is a part.” (p. 178).

“The fact that all selves are constituted by or in terms of the social process, and are individual reflections of it – or rather of this organized behavior pattern which it exhibits, and which they prehend in their respective structures – is not in the least incompatible with, or destructive of the fact that every individual self has its own peculiar individuality, its own unique pattern; because each individual self within that process, while it reflects in its organized structure the behavior pattern of that process as a whole, does so from its own particular and unique standpoint within that process, and thus reflects in its organized structure a different aspect or perspective of this whole social behavior pattern from that which is reflected in the organized structure of any other individual self within that process In other words, the organized structure of every individual self within the human social process of experience and behavior reflects, and is constituted by, the organized relational pattern of that process as a whole; but each individual self-structure reflects, and is constituted by a different aspect or perspective of this relational pattern, because each reflects this relational pattern from its own unique standpoint; so that the common social origin and constitution of individual selves and their structures does not preclude wide individual differences and variations among them, or contradict the peculiar and more or less distinctive individuality which each of them in fact possesses. Every individual self within a given society or social community reflects in its organized structure the whole relational pattern of organized social behavior which that society or community exhibits or is carrying on, and its organized structure is constituted by this pattern; but since each of these individual selves reflects a uniquely different aspect or perspective of this pattern in its structure, from its own particular and unique place or standpoint within the whole process of organized social behavior which exhibits this pattern – since, that is, each is differently or uniquely related to that whole process and occupies its own essentially unique focus of relations therein – the structure of each is differently constituted by this pattern from the way in which the structure of any other is so constituted.

The individual, as we have seen, is continually reacting back against the society. Every adjustment involves some sort of change in the community to which the individual adjusts himself.” (pp. 201-202).

And finally,

“The difference between the type of social psychology which derives the selves of individuals from the social process in which they are implicated and in which they empirically interact with one another, and the type of social psychology which instead derives that process from the selves of individuals involved in it, are clear. The first type assumes a social process or social order as the logical and biological precondition of the appearance of the selves of the individual organisms involved in that process or belonging to that order. The other type, on the contrary, assumes individual selves as the presuppositions, logically and biologically, of the social process or order within which they interact.” (p. 222).

Or consider this passage from Dewey (1922):

“But to say that some pre-existent association of human beings is prior to every particular human being who is born into the world is to mention a commonplace. These associations are definite modes of interaction of persons with one another; that is to say they form customs, institutions. There is no problem in all history so artificial as that of how "individuals" manage to form "society." The problem is due to the pleasure taken in manipulating concepts, and discussion goes on because concepts are kept from inconvenient contact with facts.” (p. 59).

The prominence of thinkers like Mead and Dewey has diminished over time with advances in contemporary scientific psychology. But at the level of individual analysis, their contributions are significant and worthy of continued exploration. The foregoing excerpts from Mead, in particular, clearly reflect an ontology of Becoming and identify the self as emerging from and being inextricably woven into the fabric of social interactions. The self is not pre-existent to a social fabric; the self emerges within it and transforms in concert with the changing social context.

The Advantages of a Process-Centric Understanding of Individual Personality

To sum, a Becoming or process-centric perspective has two central features. First, it construes individual personality as a dynamic, emergent, open-system that is subject to both endogenous and exogenous forces (see Ram & Gerstorf, 2009). Such a system can be studied scientifically, although it presents challenges in the form of uncertainty and instability. Second, it is contextual and particularistic. Individual personality cannot be studied apart from the context of particular situations, which also happen to be dynamic and unstable (Nesselroade & Ram, 2004)

A process-centric analysis of personality has a number of advantages when the scientific goal is understanding individuals, not groups. Here I outline several.

Process-centrism integrates persons and situations. It should be clear at this juncture that, from a process perspective, individuals and situations are inseparable and mutually entailing. Individual personality cannot be adequately understood apart from its

relational context. This point of view complements contemporary empirical research on the interaction of persons and situations (Fleeson, 2004). It also reflects the ecology of personal experiencing.

Process thinking implies an aesthetic dimension to personality development and functioning. This aesthetic dimension is an important implication of this perspective that I have not made explicit in the discussion thus far. If we make personality *process* central and construe individual personality as interpersonally and contextually relational, then harmonious collaborations with others and one's environment become a primary focus, and the development of harmonious relationships is a mark of an optimally functioning personality. This is a core emphasis of Confucianism, especially its formulation in the classical Confucian period, with its philosophical roots in a Becoming ontology.

It is no accident, then, that the primary interest of the classical Confucian canon is the life-long project of achieving relational virtuosity. In the classical Confucian tradition, such exemplary behavior originates in one's own family (xiao: filial piety or family reverence; Rosemont & Ames, 2009) and over time extends outward in ever widening circles of relationship (Tu, 1989, 1994). As an individual develops skill in these relational domains, he or she also develops a benevolent and non-coercive authority over others. The expansion of this skilled relationality, the aim of the so-called Confucian project (Ames, 2011), entails a lifelong effort to cultivate one's responsiveness to the ever changing relational contexts in which one moves (Ames & Hall, 2001; Ames & Rosemont, 1998; Shen, 2014; Ivanhoe, 2000; Fingarette, 1972; Tu, 1989). In Confucianism, the person with this degree of relational virtuosity is the junzi, the exemplar of optimal personality functioning (to put a 21st century gloss on the term).

This ancient, yet contemporary, and nuanced perspective on human flourishing and personal excellence can only be located in the processes of relational dynamics, not in the stasis of structures. The most significant and interesting aspect of this aesthetic relational achievement is not found in comparing one person or group to another via quanta of virtuosity; rather it is in the emergence, novelty, and creative adjustments of the individual in context and over time.

A focus on uniqueness. An emphasis on personality process and its continuous contextual responsiveness implies the persistence of emergence and novelty in personality functioning. From this perspective, if there is any one abiding characteristic of individual personality it is that it is always in transition and emergent. This way of conceptualizing an individual is more "faithful" to individual personalities as they unfold during the life-course (see Freeman, 2011). In addition, an empirical and theoretical focus on individual uniqueness has clear advantages in overcoming the risks of generalizing aggregated findings from the population level to the level of the individual. The potential hazard of such generalizations are by now well established. Hamaker (2011), Molenaar (2004; Molenaar & Campell, 2009), Valsiner (1986), Lamiell (1998, 2003) and Hamaker (2011) have all cogently argued that knowledge of what is generally true of groups may not be generally true of individuals. If the goal of scientific study is to understand personality processes as they emerge in time and in specific contexts, then the clearest path toward understanding what is generally true of individuals is to study the uniqueness of individuals, not differences across groups.

Personality-as-process suggests qualitative and quantitative inquiry as complementary. Construing personality as a process-centric, open system requires methodologies that pair with this conceptual and ontological point of view (Uher, 2015a, 2015b,

2015c). To this end, there are a number of scientific strategies, both qualitative and quantitative, that fit with this orientation.

Two recent articles underscore the importance of qualitative inquiry in theory building and in empirical investigation of psychological phenomena (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015; Gough & Lyons, 2016). Both articles, in their own way, argued against a hierarchical ranking of quantitative (best) over qualitative (second best) strategies for investigation. Both sets of research tools require specialized training in the appropriate use of each of these approaches. These articles celebrate the growing contributions of qualitative inquiry and argue for pluralistic and complementary scientific activities (qualitative, quantitative, and blended) with none seen as better than any others.

From a Becoming perspective, individual personality emerges in narrative form over time, much like a motion picture conveys a story. If a motion picture is stopped, the discrete still images are less interesting and do not tell the story when viewed as isolated snapshots. An individual personality works in much the same way. The process is the story, and so narrative analyses are appropriate for capturing the stories of individual personalities. Both Gergen, et al. (2015) and Gough and Lyons (2016) offer a wide array of ideas, resources, and strategies in the domain of narrative research. These fit well with a process-oriented perspective with the aim of understanding individuals in relational context.

There is also an array of quantitative approaches to investigating intraindividual process and variation. As with qualitative methodologies, quantitative investigations of intraindividual process and variation require specialized training, but in the latter case in mathematical and statistical modeling. Developmentalists seem to have taken the lead over personality psychologists in this domain. For example, Nesselroade and Ram (2004) observed,

“Empirical and theoretical work on intraindividual variability reminds us over and over that the use of single scores implying stable, trait-like attributes (e.g., true scores of classical test theory) that are invariant across contexts do not adequately characterize many features of the individual. Contextualists have been saying (or implying) this for years. Features of contexts tend to vary constantly; is it any wonder that behavior is so rich and interesting—and difficult to predict?” (pp. 20-21).

Using this pivotal idea as an organizing principle, Nesselroade and Ram (2004) offered a variety of statistical strategies to investigate these process-oriented individual dynamics. Readers with a training background in these types of analyses will find a number of modeling strategies here (see also Nesselroade & Molenaar, 2010 and Molenaar & Valsiner, 2008, for other examples). Further, describing the “variability, complexity, and dynamic (opposed to static) properties of the individual” (p. 778), Ram and Gerstorff (2009) described a variety of techniques for capturing the characteristics and processes of intraindividual variability and change.

Intra- and inter-disciplinarity. The foregoing discussion should make it clear that intra- and inter-disciplinary collaboration will only enhance our understanding of individual persons. Within psychology itself, collaborations between qualitatively and quantitatively oriented researchers would be a plus, as I have already noted.

But curiosity about individual persons is not the sole domain of psychological science. Philosophers, anthropologists, novelists, and theologians, to name a few, all grapple with similar questions, though the methods of inquiry may differ. For example, it should be clear in this paper that, in formulating a Becoming or process-centric model of personality, I draw upon the work of comparative philosophers and Confucian scholars. To remain sequestered in our disciplinary silos compartmentalizes our thinking, methods of inquiry, and conclusions, and isolates us from compelling ideas in other disciplinary discourses. As one example, it is impossible to read (translations of and commentaries on) Confucian texts written millenia ago and not see the parallels with contemporary psychology on matters of family and interpersonal relations and on issues of human flourishing (Giordano, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2015). As Gergen, et al. (2015) noted, “There are no disciplinary hierarchies, no distancing between the “pure” and the “applied,” no strong separation between the sciences and the arts, and no sense that some disciplines and cultures are more advanced in their methodological sophistication than others.” (p. 6).

Questions and Conclusions

Here is a potentially perplexing question: Can there be a pure-process, structure-less personality? This is an excellent question (and one that an insightful reviewer raised in response to another article), but I believe it raises an unnecessary dichotomy. I have tried to argue two things in this paper. First, understanding personality as structure or process should be matched to scientific goals. Structure may be best suited to making comparisons between individuals and groups. Process is superior for tapping into the complexities of individual personality variation as it unfolds in situ. Second, differing ontologies, Being and Becoming, undergird structure- and process-centric models. It is important to recognize these ontologies as foundational. Appealing to structures derives from the persistence and “common sense” of a Being ontology. Being and Becoming ontologies draw our thinking in different directions, however. In the case of understanding individuals (not groups), it is more fruitful to adopt a Becoming world view.

One might also ask, doesn't pure process lead to intractable chaos and therefore make impossible the scientific study of personality? How can we know anything about this person if we don't have structures we can track with some degree of certainty and predictability? Doesn't a Becoming orientation introduce a degree of uncertainty that is too great of a scientific burden to bear? But as Clegg (2010) has suggested, uncertainty is endemic to the natural world, including human personalities, and we must always work with it. It cannot be eliminated and in fact, Clegg averred, it is unscientific to do so. We must, therefore, embrace uncertainty as a real and important dimension of individual experiencing.

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. Such patterns need not suggest a substance (e.g., trait or self) “within” the person. This is an important shift in ontological thinking, and moves us away from a structural description of the person (or group) to an event-based, process-centric Becoming explanation at the individual level.

This way-of-becoming-in-the-world is not chaotic or without pattern. There is a coherence here, though process-centrism does negate a formulaic approach to understanding

individuals. As comparative philosopher Roger Ames (2015) observed, “All human beings might be similar enough to justify certain generalizations, yet each person is at the same time a unique, *one of a kind*.” (p. 16; italics original). To say this another way, in avoiding a substance ontology and endorsing a process-centric viewpoint, we do not give up the wholeness or coherence of the individual personality – in fact, we foreground it. But the coherence is always emergent and dynamic.

In conclusion, looking back over the main ideas in this paper, a symmetry emerges across different disciplinary sources, all of which point to the advantages of construing individual personality as process. The Becoming ontology of classical Confucian China clearly articulates a process oriented, event based understanding of the world and the persons living in it. Even persons living in *contemporary* Eastern cultures show patterns of thought, perception, and behavior that differ from their Western counterparts (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Markus & Kitayama, 2010; Kitayama & Uskul, 2011; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001).

Fast forward away from ancient China and to the early 20th century in the West, some 50 years after the birth of psychology in Wundt’s lab, and strands of process-oriented thinking are observed in the work of Mead (1934) and Dewey (1922). Fast forward again to decades later at the time of this writing and, with the benefits of advanced statistical modeling techniques and of methods of qualitative inquiry, we find the same emphasis on process, change, emergence, transition, and novelty. In a sense, when seeking to understand individual persons, the classical Confucians of ancient China and a cadre of 21st century psychologists are saying the same thing, although they are speaking different disciplinary languages.

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