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Published in:
Psychology and Developing Societies

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
[10.1177/09713336211038813](https://doi.org/10.1177/09713336211038813)

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Publication date:
2021

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Valsiner, J. (2021). Striving for Synthesis in General Psychology: Lessons from India. *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 33(2), 175-189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09713336211038813>

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Striving for Synthesis in General Psychology: Lessons from India

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ABSTRACT, The importance of the life-long contributions of Professor Sinha is in his search for new perspectives in psychology that would respect Indian cultural history. In that spirit I will outline themes that are prominent in Indian cultural traditions from which universal science of human psychology could learn. All human beings relate to water and fertility, creating meaningful rituals of handling this valuable commodity. Likewise it is deeply human to generate borders and social conditions for their crossings, and to participate collective rituals of symbolic processions. Psychology in the Occident has been looking towards India as if it were an esoteric collection of local practices that would fit the empirical interests of cross-cultural psychology. I would claim that the psychological riches of India are of primary importance for general psychology.

Psychology is not an “empirical science.” Or—if somebody finds it to be that—all the worse for the science. In fact that label is an epistemological mis-nomer that confuses scientists all around the World—no science can be “empirical” in its central epistemological core, but all sciences have their own pathways for theoretically relevant accesses to empirical phenomena.

This tribute to the contributions of Professor Sinha to our science is meant to appreciate and point to the general potential for basic—general—psychology that can—and at times has—started from India. The overall general starting point of realization of that potential is the axiomatic assumption of mutually opposite features of the psychological systems to be united within the same wholes, and generate psychological flexibility in the conduct of human beings. Yet this axiomatic stand is only the beginning of psychology’s investigation. The discipline needs to elaborate concrete structures that allow such flexibility to have the place in the human lives. If the American-dominated psychology in the 20th century was dedicated to finding out how to predict and control the externally visible side of the psyche (i.e. behavior), then the new general psychology of the 21st century sets the goal precisely to make sense of the opposite—how can persons break out from previously established (somewhat predictable) routines to create a new way of conduct, and how they operate to resist the efforts by others to control their conduct. Human conduct is characterized by *selective intentional innovation* in the ongoing life course— which in common language terms often becomes labelled “creativity”. The latter is not the privilege of artists but happens in each and every person in one’s living one’s life—every time a little different from the past, and—sometimes—bringing into one’s life large ruptures that may be

both beneficial and fatal for living on. Human life dramas are filled with innovations and the constant creation of deviance from the old and known guarantees us all readiness to adjust to any new environmental conditions.

India—as it is-- in each of us

Setting the task to learn from (and with) India needs to start from understanding that what we are observing in India is actually something that is present in ourselves. In fact it is so basic that we almost cannot believe in our own deep internal sophistication.

THE MAIN DIRECTION FOR LEARNING— understanding hyper-complex wholistic structures that operate by affective primacy (pleromatization). THESE STRUCTURES GRANT THE RESILIENCY OF THE HUMAN PSYCHE

The centrality of the peripheral: borders in the world and in the mind

We make distinctions—and each distinction entails creation of a border between what we have distinguished. The border may be strictly formed—a fence, a door, etc—or taking the form of gradual distinction of some object from another. In the middle of a forest at some place the notion of the *sacred grove* makes the distinction for us as we walk through it.

Of course there are other—more strictly organized—borders that are elevated to the legal and economical exclusion means between countries, social classes, and genders. Our fascination of keys and access cards, our nervous worries about passwords and loss of cyber security—all indicate how every person lives in a mentally segregated personal world. Some of the borders exclude the Other, others—open the access road to the inside. The widespread morning ritual in Tamil Nadu to draw a *kolam* in front of the house to mark the relationship of the inside and outside worlds is a “mebrane” that all people who enter or exit symbolically register. Kolam is a re-constructable threshold decoration—it is completed in the morning, worn off by the feet of comers and goers over the day—to be re-constructed the next morning.

The basic idea of linking the inside and outside of a house by a symbolic link is widespread over the World, but often not turned into the elaborate art form of *kolam* in Tamil Nadu. When we asked students in Kerala in 2017 to draw an analogue for such house entrance decorations they created flower arrangements (Figure 1). They had not done that—creating *pookalam*—before, but intuitively captured the basic inherent symbolic structure of the message.

Figure 1. A house entrance decoration created by Kerala students (author's photo)



Human expectations: facing the uncertainty of desires

Human lives are lived facing the future—to accomplish our efforts, create a family, have children, live to our best under the circumstances, rich or poor. Fertility is the most crucial universal feature for human beings. On its success depends the survival of the societies and all of the human species. The imperative for women – the concrete manifestation of “I want to bear a child” is unique personal desire that is socially propagated and individually internalized all over the World. Yet it is always filled with uncertainties-- and as such—lead to the construction of fertility rituals. The presence of such rituals is a human universal—even if the particular forms vary widely from society to society and person to person.

There are many versions around the World, and in Southern India these involve the fertility granting power of snakes who are summoned to help. Snakes are usually seen as dangerous adversaries and evoke often unconscious fears in persons not

accustomed to their ways of moving and feeding themselves. In India their meaning is turned around and their magical powers are sought for the benefit of fertility. H

How does human psyche create such turns from fear to positive cooperation? Figure 2 situates a snake in the context of fertility prayers.

Figure 2. A snake image overseeing the prayer for fertility (Nagaraja Temple, Kerala, photo by Nandita Chaudhary, reproduced by permission)



Collective symbolic actions

Social processions abound in all societies around the World. People in groups—from small to large—or in massive crowds move purposefully from one place to another (and back) for specific meaningful accomplishment of the act. A religious deity in a temple or a church needs “to take a walk” around the city, or one needs to visit a far-away pilgrimage place once in a lifetime. Football fans would travel long distances to scream collectively for their team to win over the opponents—and at times clash with the fans of the opposing team. The large variety of such organized crowd phenomena all over the World indicates their societal as well as personal-psychological functions. Joining a crowd involved in some meaningful action and temporary merging one’s Self with the collective Hyper-Self for the occasion is a recurrent ritual as the practices of mass religious services indicate.

India offers the World a set of specific versions of such rituals—the *Ratha Jatra*. Even if most well known from the annual activities in Puri, Odissa, different versions of the chariot pulling ritual are performed in many locations over India. In contrast to mass movement of crowds in other places, here we can observe very clear thematization (deities are taken to visit another temple) together with carnivalization (the most powerful person—local king—works as the sweeper in front of the chariots cleaning the path with water), not to speak of the massive togetherness of the many bodies in the crowd moving the chariots ahead. The whole chariot ritual is a theatrical performance where the mass audience participates in the meaningful “take deities for a walk” which involves ordinary ritualistic moments—yet is unique in its collective mass performance of collective activity.

The meaningfulness of the most basic of all liquids—water

It is deeply surprising that the liquid that is most crucial in sustaining life—water—has not been an object of investigation by psychologists. Every aspect of water—its huge reservoirs and miniscule dips starting to come down from the clouds after a famine—are psychologically relevant for our well-being. Having *clean* water to drink is crucial for our health, and *dirty-but-sacred* water for our cultural rituals is important for daily lives. We invent new procedures that turn one kind of dirty water into a new kind—chemically cleaned—version and are proud of our chlorine smelling “clean” backyard swimming pools—while being fearful of the water in a natural lake as possibly “dirty”. Water becomes our enemy in the times of floods, and desired friend after a dry period ends and it is needed here-and-now for the fertility of our cultivated crops. We protect ourselves from it by umbrellas while writing beautiful poems about raindrops hitting the dusty ground. We make it into a sellable commodity—and face its scarcity in many areas of the World. Human societies have had to carry water from wells over long distances, and livestock farmers have conflicted about the access rights of their herds to the limited water sources. By various symbolic acts we turn some water into “holy water” and attribute to it magical curing qualities. In sum—whatever meaningful acts human beings undertake, water is always somewhere involved. It is a natural resource

of deeply symbolic qualities that often ends up as a commercial sellable commodity (Figure 3)

Figure 3. **Water in frames: plastic versus nature**

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bisleri>)



The water made to be pure by inserting it into the plastic bottle is expected to benefit from the background of the purity of the snow of high mountains in the background—not to forget the allusion to history in the label. The need to symbolize the water in many ways—independent of its actual “purity” in chemical sense—leads to various versions of water use in bathing in holy rivers of temple tanks. These symbolic transformations of the same chemical substance are a beautiful testimony for the human dependence on the meanings of their relations with the environment.

A summary: not exotic displays but meaningful human activities

What can we learn from India? My answer is simple—psychological universal phenomena in richly configured forms. The focus on *richly configured* forms makes the learning from (and with) India both promising and intellectually difficult. The promising part entails access to the fullness of human ways of being. Ordinary everyday human phenomena that exist in any society may take on particularly enriched symbolic forms that stand out in their colorful richness. So they become accessible to the curious researcher—but only if the latter can cross the pressures of viewing these through lens of “otherness”—seeing these forms as something esoteric.

This “tourist gaze” is of course promoted in the selling of the “otherness experience” by the tourist industries, and it can interfere into psychologist’s research efforts. It would take special *Bildung* of the researcher’s investigative perspective to bypass and neutralize that “tourist gaze” in one’s efforts to understand the Other.

The enriched symbolic quality of the complex forms makes general psychology of our new kind into a cultural psychology. So—by seeing India in all of its richness as an extension of a very ordinary society with highly elaborated meaning systems leads India to contribute to general psychology— like it has contributed to all humanity— by letting us feel the basics in the middle of enormous variety (no “esoteric practices” but very basic human psychological functions deeply signified)-

What is it? New General Psychology

The starting axiom of the New General Psychology is the unity of opposites structurally organized within the same whole. It is a systemic approach where each and every detected part requires specification of its opposite counterpart and delineation of the borders and function of the system. Let me illustrate it with what I consider to be Professor Sinha’s main contribution to psychological science—understanding that seemingly irreconcilable opposites in persons and societies—individualism and collectivism—are not only mutually related but necessary in their dynamic mutual relating within the whole of the Self. Formulated in the 1990s—after two decades of occidental empirical psychology trying to segregate the two into opposites—the insight into their unity is a major breakthrough in psychology of the 20th century. In the mirror of the accumulating evidence from cross-cultural psychology that seemed to indicate the separation of the opposites, the counter-intuitive idea of their systemic unity is comparable to the Copernican revolution in astronomy.

So— in my Self the individualistic side depends upon the collectivist side, and vice versa. The two opposites are one—but not fused into one! They feed into each other with the result that the Self becomes capable of *flexible* ways to relate with the demands of the given setting. *How that flexibility is made possible* through the various ways in which my individualistic strivings come into functional relations with my collectivistic urges is a research question that general psychology is to address. The counterpart of the same question at the societal level is a question for general sociology.

The New General Psychology introduces new foci into past General Psychology and our current efforts

- Sign mediation: the human *psyche* is mediated by signs generated by the person facing uncertainties into the future
- Focus on large structured wholes: human psyche is a hierarchy of component systems that relate to others by specific functional rules.
- Person is knowable as an individual system and needs to be studied as such (Idiographic Science). There is generalizability not only in the given person but also in a single instant (nanopsychology).

- Focus on border zones (“membranes”) and their transfer: the processes of regulation of the system.
- Explanations built on the principles of catalysis, rather than causation.

All these features are new to 21st century psychology—even as they have solid historical basis in other sciences before. Thus, chemistry became a basic science in the 1830s to 1910 period thanks to the move to catalytic explanations. The semiotic perspectives of Charles S. Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure at the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries illuminated philosophy and linguistic sciences. The focus on structured wholes was a dominant theme in psychology in the 1880s-1920 period in the form of *Ganzheitspsychologie* and various forms of Gestalt psychology. Idiographic science in psychology was brought in by Wilhelm Windelband in 1894, but its real development in psychology has happened since the beginning of the 21st century. Thus—all the new features that New General Psychology brings into its new build-up have all substantive roots and predecessors in the various sciences.

What are the practical implications of the new features in the practice of psychology? General psychology deals with universal features of the psyche—on the basis of unique psychological phenomena. The universal feature of sign construction—and use—operates on the basis of any emerging new experience that is moving the person towards the future. Construction of signs is a tool for making meaning—through imagination—facing the indeterminate future (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Emergence of signs in irreversible time

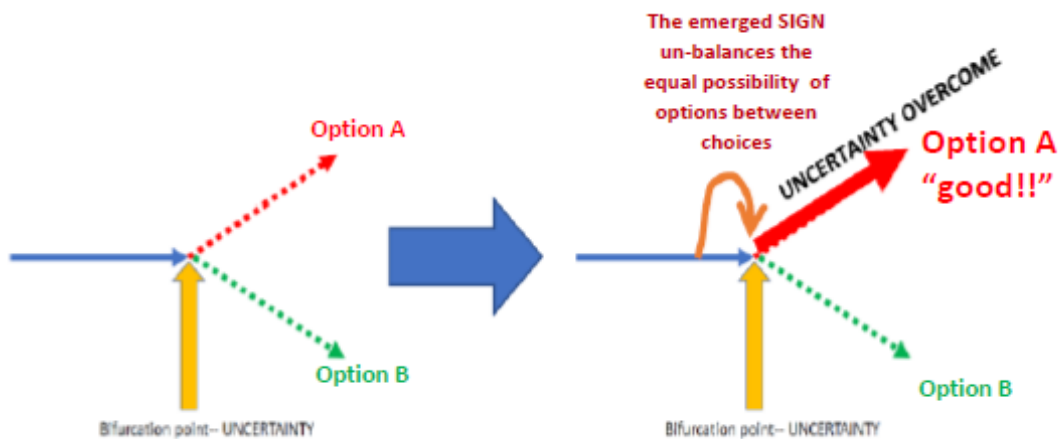
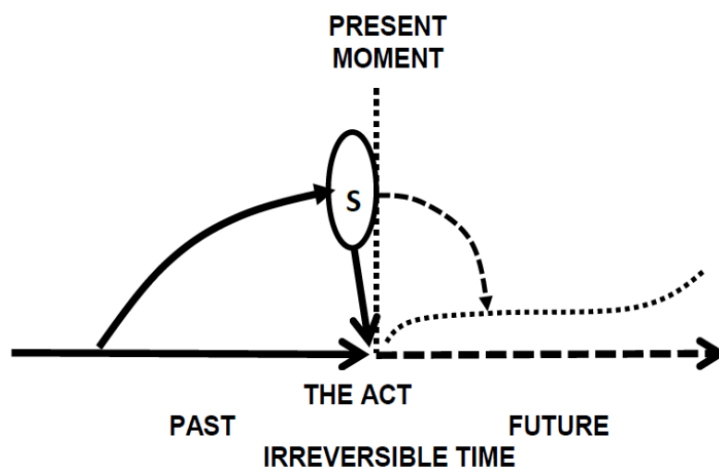


Figure 4 illustrates the minimum condition for making of a sign. On the left side of the figure we see the emergence of uncertainty in irreversible time—by bifurcation into Option A and Option B. The equal possibility of these leads to the need to decide upon overcoming uncertainty. This becomes possible when a sign imbalances the move to the future by creating an imaginary value for one of the options (“Option A is good”).

While the immediate role of the emerging sign is to create inequality (imbalance) on the move to the future, the impact of the emerged sign has dual function—for the immediate present moment (“Option A is good”) and for the future that is indeterminate (Figure 5).

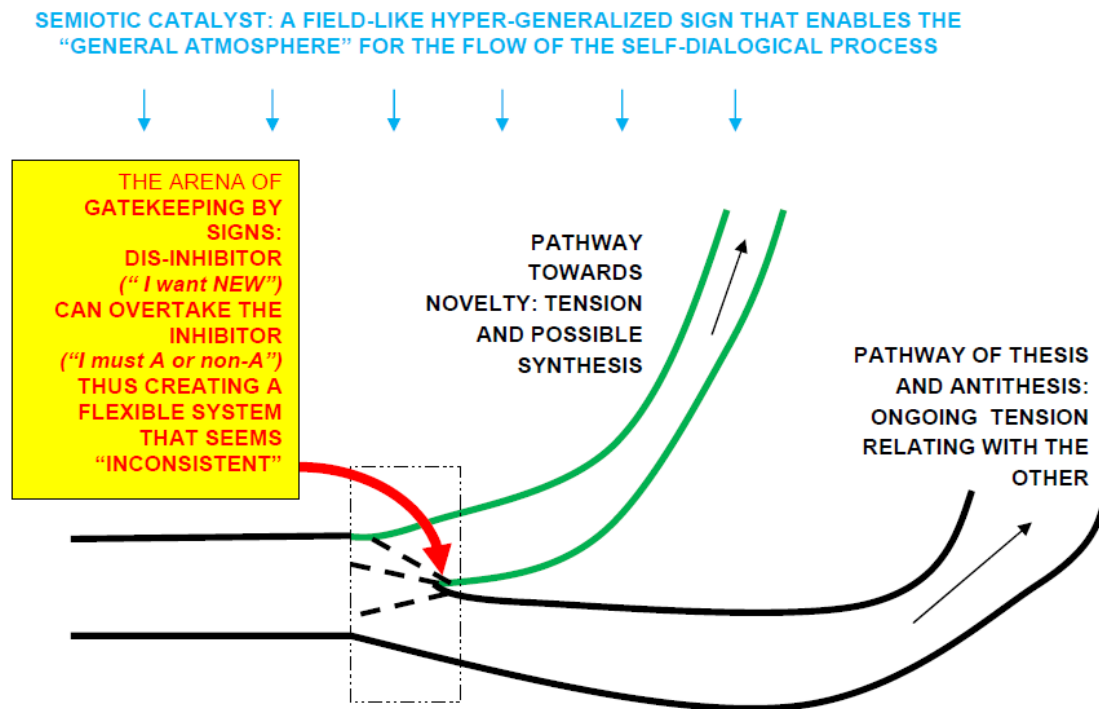
Figure 5. **Dual function of sign regulation in life course**

**THE BASIC SCHEME: SIGNS REGULATING CONDUCT IN
IRREVERSIBLE TIME
(DOUBLE FUNCTION- IMMEDIATE AND FOR THE FUTURE)**



Yet here is a complicated moment in our facing the future—the message to the future is generalized, indeterminately targeted (as the future is unknown), and contextualizable when the appropriate experience in the future. The actual future encounter based on the past—encoded by sign—but it needs to operate with flexibility not to repeat the previous life situation. The actual bifurcation point involves regulation of the meaning making process to proceed either in the previous ways, or take the new direction to innovation (Figure 6)

Figure 6. Where innovation is initiated



The re-contextualized sign from the past brought into the arena of gatekeeping is the birthplace of inconsistency with the past—thus the starting point for innovation. The person feeling the meaning from the past (“Option A was good then”—Figure 4) resists that encoded suggestion to take the opposite pathway towards new synthesis.

Figure 6 has important implications for methodology. The locus where our empirical methods could tell us something new about the general ways in which innovations are produced need to be at the *zones of emergence* of the move towards the new and uncertain experiences. Thus it is the flexibility of minimal sensation seeking—making small amendments in one’s ways of living simple because “I want to feel what it is like”—that are the ordinary places that need to be studied microgenetically—to reveal the potentials for large-scale creativity. This direction in the field of psychology’s set of imperatives for what is considered scientific outcomes in investigations leads to the basic move from correlating outcomes of presumed psychological characteristics to those of study of the processes in the real transition points (“membranes” in the right side of Figure 7).

Figure 7. **Beyond correlational relations to the study of the *in-between***

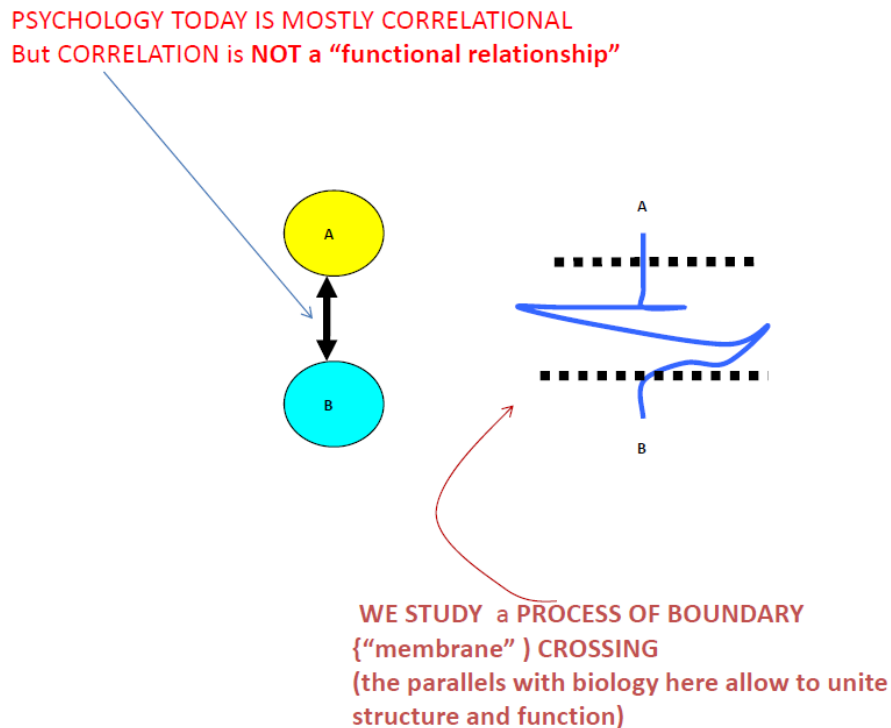
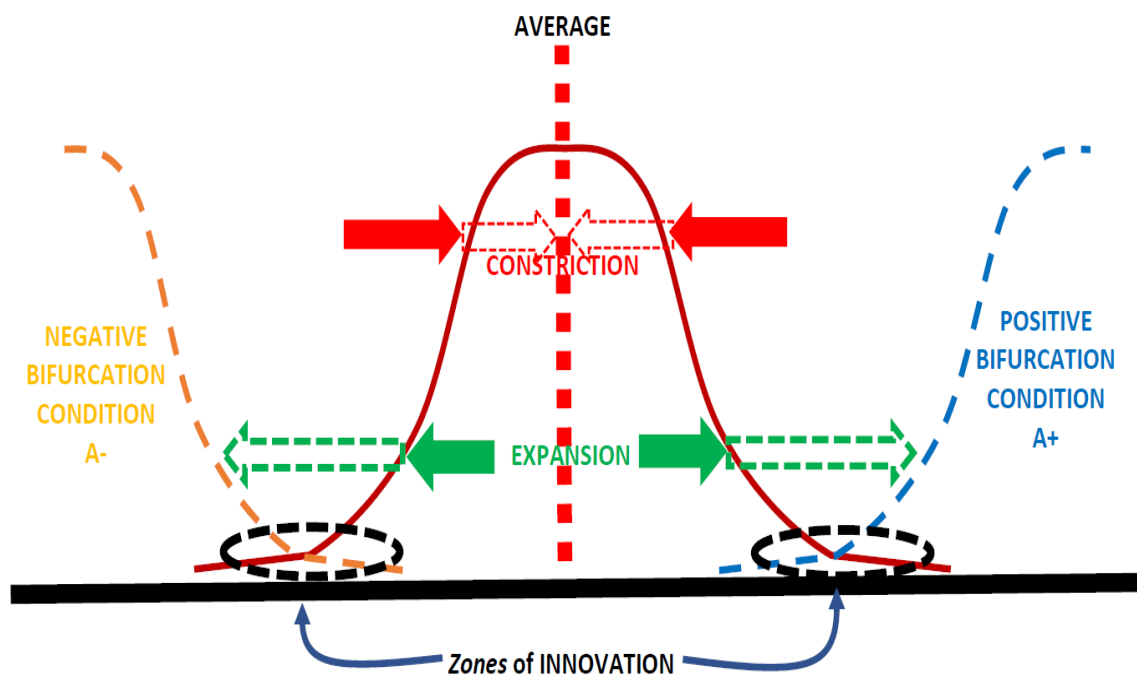


Figure 7 may look dramatically novel in our time, but about a century ago was about to be developed. Any psychological system that emphasized processes—of “stream of consciousness”, introspective processes in thinking, or psychodynamics of the unconscious— were ready for development of microgenetic (*Aktualgenese*) perspectives. The fashion for applied implementation of various measurement systems in the 1920s effectively blocked these methodological opportunities for a century. In New General Psychology these are being re-started.

The New General Psychology reverses the focus of research on the map of distribution—the epitome of accumulative look at data—that has dominated as a relic in psychology’s roots—the “normal distribution” (or “Gaussian Curve”). The claim that all phenomena come to approximate the normal curve if sufficiently accumulated (large N) has no substantiation beyond an axiomatic belief. In the science based on development of unique experiences that represent psychological universals the use of the accumulations in such distribution is that of reversal of the center and the periphery. If in the epistemological thinking based on the Gaussian Curve the focus is on the central tendencies in the distribution (and the variation around these is made of no relevance, and the outliers on both ends of distribution do not gain relevance), then in New General psychology it is the expansion of the distribution to consider variability in the accumulation crucial, and look for generality in the newly found cases (A+) and currently disappearing (A-) cases (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Reversal of focus of interest in looking at distributions



This reversal of the perspective is consistent with the centrality of time in the course of life experiences. A normal distribution is a tensional compromise between expansion beyond the averages or prototypes (tendency towards innovation) and tendency for continuity (constriction towards the average). In the maximum case of totally homogeneous class the distribution would equal the average, with no deviation from it. Such classes of objects may fit industrial production of objects, but are not findable in human psyche.

The two zones of innovation in Figure 8—on both ends of the normal distribution—map precisely onto the gatekeeping process described in Figure 4. The microgenetic account on development is the tension of what is (now) and what is not (or no more) in the process of the individual case moving forward in living.

Conclusion: General psychology of “we as they”

Learning from the Other takes place in oneself. Thus we all learn about our own epistemological limitations when we embrace the cultural and psychological richness of India. This creates an interesting paradox—in order to truly understand and make use of the psychological phenomena as they occur in all glamor and poverties in India, we need to overcome our own tendency to view these phenomena as being out of the ordinary. Or—they may be outside of our life experiences, but they are real for the

people who live through their experiences. Our usual comparisons—“we” *versus* “they”—need to be replaced by “we as they” (and correspondingly, “they as we”). This is the substitution of focus that New General Psychology introduces, going beyond the traditional cross-cultural psychology. I dare to believe that Professor Sinha would have agreed to this respectful—rather than exotic—learning with India.