



## *I Don't Quite Get It...Personal Experiences with the Person-Oriented Approach*

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**Abstract:** Why have person-oriented approaches been slow to be embraced by developmental scholars? What is holding back the person-oriented approach? A personal odyssey through the field of person-oriented research illustrates the challenges that confront scholars who use the approach and those who are considering it. Five challenges are identified: (1) terminological confusion; (2) accessibility; (3) resistance to change; (4) over- and misapplication of the approach; and (5) difficulties with hypothesis testing. No easy solutions are offered.

**Keywords:** person-oriented, person-centered, research methods

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Painted on the side of Kiasma, the Finnish National Gallery's Museum of Contemporary Art, is the following: *I don't quite get it...* The building, located in a prominent location near the Central Station in Helsinki, was the product of a competition restricted to architects from the Nordic and Baltic countries. The choice of the architect (US citizen Steven Holl) and his final product (*Chiasma*) puzzled many. The building's name, derived from the Greek letter chi, means a crossing or exchange, and is commonly used to signify the point where chromatids cross over and exchange genetic material during the first metaphase of meiosis. Looking somewhat like a large corrugated metal tube, the museum might be confused for a train maintenance building were it not shiny and well maintained (and had it not the enigmatic motto emblazoned on the facade). Under scoring the visual challenges the building poses to the passerby, *The Architecture Review* described it as "an essay in subtleties." The artwork inside is equally bewildering – currently on display is a recreation of Alfredo Jaar's 1995 structure, *One Million Finnish Passports*, a succinct summary of the installation. And yet, we are told, the point is not to befuddle, but rather to emphasize "the personal experience".

Now comes another American, with lesser credentials than the architect, mysteriously tasked to interpret the com-

plex work of eminent European scholars for a new Scandinavian journal devoted to person-oriented research. Sometimes he thinks he has some insight into the methods but often he doesn't quite get it, which might make him an appropriate emissary to a scientific community that does not fully grasp and is reluctant to embrace the notions advanced. This outsider might also be an appropriate envoy to carry messages from the outside world to those in the person-oriented enclave, who are often bewildered by the confusion and indifference of the larger scientific community. What follows is a personal experience with the person-oriented approach. I focus on topics that I have never properly understood. This is an essay about confusion.

### Sources of Confusion

I am not new to the topic. I had the good fortune to spend some months near the end of the previous millennium in Jyväskylä with Lea Pulkkinen, who introduced me to David Magnusson and Lars Bergman. I heard some talks. I read some papers. The examples were compelling. I urge you to reread classic investigations illustrating how patterns of conduct problems in childhood are linked to patterns of adjustment problems in adolescence and adulthood (Magnusson & Bergman, 1990; Stattin & Magnusson, 1996) and

how male and female personality types obtained through a unique nomination methodology (Pulkkinen, 1996) replicate the classic personality types obtained by Jack Block (1971) as well as many of the outcomes associated with the types. Impressed with the innovative critical thinking behind the data collection and analyses, I devoted a sabbatical to my first person-oriented project. We carefully created childhood behavioral typologies that anticipated difficult, low agreeable personality types (Laursen, Pulkkinen, & Adams, 2002). We convincingly demonstrated that disagreeable personalities were stable over time and suffered from a host of pathologies, including alcoholism, criminality, unemployment, and depression. I assumed that this paper would be part of the leading edge of developmental research embracing person-oriented strategies. I was wrong. Few read the paper and even fewer cited it. I tried again, a few years later, in a paper demonstrating that categorical constellations of support that adolescents received from various relationships predicted outcomes more effectively than traditional variable-centered approaches in which adjustment outcomes were separately predicted from specific relationship variables (Laursen, Furman, & Mooney, 2006). The response was similarly underwhelming. Undeterred, we recently used the approach to identify different types of friendships on the basis of participant reports of relationship quality, describing the stability and outcomes associated with each (Hiatt, Laursen, Mooney, & Rubin, 2015). It is too soon to gauge the reception of this effort.

The wave of person-oriented developmental research never materialized, at least not in North America. To be sure, scholars like to invoke the concept. Conceptual overviews (e.g., Magnusson & Stattin, 1998) and primers (e.g., Laursen & Hoff, 2006) are typically well-received. I would argue, however, that conceptual papers are cited more often than they are applied. The goal of person-oriented research is thought to be vaguely laudable, but much like physical exercise, it can be onerous to take up, it lacks a practical appeal, it is practiced far less than it is endorsed, and its benefits are not fully appreciated. But more than anything else, the person-oriented approach is a source of confusion. I offer a few thoughts as to why.

### Terminology

I confess that I sometimes inadvertently use the term “person-centered” when I mean “person-oriented”. OK, it is worse than that. I sometimes publish articles that are titled “person-centered” when I mean “person-oriented”. (I also call ships “boats”, despite many lectures on the distinction from an uncle who was a naval officer.) Notwithstanding my inability to use the terms correctly, I am at least clear as to what person-oriented approaches entail. Many are not.

Most developmental scholars have a passing familiarity with person-centered therapy from an undergraduate psychology course. It is a form of talking therapy developed by

Carl Rogers in the 1950s and popularized in the 1960s. Rejecting both behaviorism and psychoanalysis, person-centered therapists embraced humanism, promoting self-actualization and unconditional positive regard in an effort to promote self-worth and reduce incongruence between the ideal and actual self. Superficially, person-centered therapy and person-oriented methodological approaches overlap in the sense that the individual is at the center of each. Whatever the merits of the therapy, the term “person-centered” in this context carries connotations of a squishy, subjective, unempirical, feel-good attitude about individual development. Complicating matters further is a recent move among nurses toward person-centered care, which aims to ensure that the individual is an equal partner in his or her treatment. The stated goal of person-centered care is to provide a humanistic treatment for the entire patient, not just the physical ailment. Here too there is superficial overlap between person-centered care and person-oriented approaches in the idea that the individual is more than the sum of the parts. Whatever the merits of this approach to health care, the term “person-centered” in this context carries connotations of an unquantifiable goal with no agreed upon definition or implementation.

There is more. Person-oriented approaches are often described in terms of a holistic emphasis on understanding the individual. Unfortunately, this sounds suspiciously like holistic medicine, which is an alternative form of treatment designed to care for the mind, body, and spirit, and holistic healing, which seeks to address lifestyle imbalances. On the internet the term “holistic” literally conjures up images of candles, massages, and various yoga positions.

Finally, person-oriented approaches are described as interactional. What does *that* mean? Few can be sure because “interactional” is not a term that is commonly used. Some developmental scholars may be familiar with symbolic interactionism, a major sociological theory that argues that meaning is created through social interactions. Unhelpfully, symbolic interactionists reject quantitative research, arguing that statistical data are biased and invalid. Other developmental scholars may be acquainted with the philosophical perspective of interactionism, which is a dualistic theory that argues that the mind and the body are distinct and autonomous, separate entities that nonetheless influence one another. Neither of these perspectives inspires a vision of scientific objectivism.

Can it really be the case that semantic confusion perpetuates a bias against person-oriented approaches? I cannot say for certain, but I strongly suspect the answer is yes because the confusion is readily reinforced when the uninitiated are cursorily exposed to the core concepts of person-oriented research. Consider a not unrepresentative example from the first sentence of the abstract of a highly visible paper on person-oriented approaches to research: “There is growing acceptance of a holistic, interactionist view in which the individual is seen as an organized whole, functioning and developing as a totality” (Bergman &

Magnusson, 1997, p. 291). To the initiated, the assertion is a short-hand distinction designed to set person-oriented approaches apart from variable-oriented practices. To the uninitiated, the assertion carries a vague whiff of disrepute.

Finally, for too many scholars, qualitative research is conflated with person-oriented research practices. I am not making this up: I have reviewed doctoral dissertations and manuscripts for empirical journals, and read published empirical articles in which the person-oriented approach is invoked as a justification for a small  $n$  design, participant research, or the presentation of little more than descriptive statistics as results. A stroll through academic search engines will reveal many studies in which the statistical analyses are described as qualitative and person-oriented. Of course, it is technically possible to use qualitative data in person-oriented analyses. More typical, however, is the practice of using qualitative as a modifier for person-oriented analyses or simply mislabeling qualitative analyses as person-oriented. The conflation of person-oriented research and qualitative research seriously undermines the scientific credibility of the former in the eyes of many. Qualitative research is anathema in many big data circles, and the false association with qualitative research tarnishes the empirical reputation of person-oriented approaches. I will go so far as to say that scholars who fully appreciate the distinction between person-oriented approaches and qualitative data are nevertheless reluctant to pursue person-oriented analyses (or label them as such) because they fear prejudice from an ignorant reviewer or editor.

### Access

It is hard to conduct person-oriented analyses. Off the shelf software packages, primarily designed for variable-oriented analyses, typically carry only a limited range of person-oriented statistical options. R and SAS modules remain beyond the reach of the casual statistician. Statistical packages designed specifically for person-oriented analyses tend to be shareware. Point and click features are rare. Most packages are updated infrequently, at best. Some cannot be run on the latest versions of computer operating systems. None are user-friendly in the manner of large, commercial variable-oriented software packages. A vicious cycle unfolds. Because the demand for person-oriented software is low, there is little incentive to create accessible software, so the available tools remain off-putting. Because the software is inaccessible, there are serious obstacles to those who might want to add person-oriented techniques to their statistical arsenal, which keeps demand for new software low.

### A revolution afoot?

Impossible as it is to imagine, for he is the gentlest of souls, I once had a disagreement with Lars Bergman. I

co-edited a special issue of the *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* on person-oriented and variable-oriented approaches to longitudinal data. Professor Bergman graciously provided a commentary (Bergman & Trost, 2006). In the first draft of his commentary, he argued that person-oriented approaches are the opposite of variable-oriented approaches, because each holds fundamentally different assumptions. I suggested that instead of viewing the two as opposite poles of the same dimension, the approaches were orthogonal, offering different views on related, but distinct research questions. Diplomatically, Professor Bergman concluded the following: "Normally, neither approach can lay claims to produce results that have an immediate, convincing affinity to the mechanism we are interested in. Both require that different assumptions are accepted to produce interpretable results. These assumptions are very different, and most methodological realizations of the two approaches are also so disparate that they are partly windows into different worlds" (p. 629). This suggests a third possibility: Blind men describing an elephant. It may well be that person-oriented and variable-oriented perspectives constrain the investigator to discrete questions concerning development. Each approach may successfully answer the questions posed within the framework, but neither captures the full nature of developmental change. (Perhaps it is germane that in one of the earliest forms of this parable, the Buddha likens the blind men to preachers and scholars who are "quarrelsome, wrangling, and disputatious, each maintaining reality is thus and thus" because they can only see one side of a thing.)

Developmental scientists do not want to be likened to blind men reporting narrow visions of the truth. We want our science to be taken seriously; we are uncomfortable with suggestions of uncertainty. Furthermore, the notion that different empirical schemes offer different views of reality seems to some a slippery slope to relativistic views that truth is in the eye of the beholder. Finally, complex conclusions are not easily communicated, either to the general public or to a scientific audience. Developmental scholars, like other psychologists, prefer a clear narrative, which tend not to arise from orthogonal methodological approaches. It is easier to insist on replication.

Developmental scholars are resistant to change. We know something of Thomas Kuhn's depiction of scientific revolutions, wherein a thesis (the status quo) is challenged by an antithesis (anomalous data derived from new methods). There is, perhaps, some fuzziness as to what follows. For those in need of a refresher, it was Immanuel Kant (not Kuhn) who argued that a synthesis or compromise is the natural resolution to the challenge of a thesis by an antithesis, and it was George Hegel and Karl Marx (not Kuhn) who argued that negation arises from within and arrests the old paradigm, at which time something altogether new arises from without. For Kuhn, new methods creates a new paradigm, which becomes the status quo that sets the parameters for scientific practice and explanation until this

status quo is successfully challenged and overthrown by anomalous data derived from other, newer methods.

To argue that person-oriented approaches and variable-oriented approaches are opposites is tantamount to an oblique statement of scientific war (as in this new method is the negation of the status quo). At the very least, it could be interpreted as a suggestion that a paradigm shift is afoot. It is risky business to take on the status quo. Converts must be won. The usual examples of scientific conversion hinge on the demonstration of empirical anomalies identified through new methodology. At the moment, the person-oriented approach is short on persuasive anomalies. Permit me to paraphrase the debate. Why adopt person-oriented methods that do not enjoy widespread currency instead of sticking to status quo variable-oriented methods? The answer that person-oriented methods are “better” at describing individuals and depicting their growth is difficult to make when “better” is defined in conceptual and philosophical terms rather than empirical terms. Strong evidence is missing that person-oriented approaches explain hitherto unexplainable phenomena or account for incongruous facts that may well be artifacts of variable-oriented methods.

Pragmatics and flexibility are advised. At a conceptual level, it is easier to win converts to a philosophy that promises to strengthen the intellectual edifice that many have spent their entire careers constructing than it is to gather adherents who are willing to abandon the work of a lifetime in favor of something new. Does one advocate revolution and overthrow of the old order from without? Or does one work from within, to bring about gradual institutional change? The argument will not be settled here. In the absence of convincing anomalous findings that threaten the validity of the prevailing paradigm, however, I suspect that there will be no revolution. To me, this suggests that change must be wrought from within, working to join person-oriented techniques to compatible variable-oriented counterparts, instead of pitting one against the other.

### **Taxometric skepticism**

Those with clinical training know that taxa are not easily created. Those without clinical training may not be familiar with the debate surrounding taxometrics. What constitutes a type? Paul Meehl (1992) persuasively argued that a taxon encompassed a nonarbitrary class of individuals that cannot be created by fiat. We cannot will a category to exist simply because it is logical or cognitively attractive. To establish the existence of taxa requires a rigorous empirical process whereby latent classes are identified through quantitative indicators with nonoverlapping distributions that confirm theoretically relevant categorizations. This is a tall order.

Plato gets credit for the notion of carving nature at its joints, an aphorism that describes how best to obtain natural, commonsense categories of “things that go together”.

Beaks tend to co-occur with wings and feathers, therefore there must exist some natural category of things with all three traits. We label them “birds”, which helps to reify the natural category.

Taxa are readily created in person-oriented analyses. In fact, some might argue that this is one of the primary goals of person-oriented analyses. There is no question that the analyses that yield person-oriented categories are rigorous. But do they rise to the level of taxometric categorization? If we are honest, we must conclude that they often do not. Taxa are unusual and hard cases are more common than easy ones. Might it be the case that person-oriented analyses too readily force people into artificial categories? The measurement and diagnosis of psychopathological categories have proven arduous. Much debate and considerable effort has gone into the construction of multivariate taxometric procedures that search for abrupt changes in the structure of data that are indicative of latent subgroups or typologies (Waller & Meehl, 1998). It seems to me that some developmental scholars are prone to producing taxa too quickly and with too little thought as to their meaning.

The haphazard invocation of a typology matters because the fundamental premise of person-oriented research is that unique groups of individuals can (and should) be identified. The most obvious taxa are identified through the use of class variables, which are not distributed continuously but rather categorically. True typologies do not represent the extreme ends of a continuum. They are not approximations of pure, hypothetical types. They must exist as natural categories. Often, however, class indicators are not available and instead the person-oriented scholar must rely on dimensional variables. Dimensions are traits that apply to all individuals, in amounts that are distributed normally. Constellations of scores on normally distributed dimensions may be used to identify categories, but typically they are indicators, not defining features. There must be a true category of individuals for which the indicators reliably signal membership. Dimensional assessments are ripe with measurement error, which makes them fallible indicators (Meehl, 1995). I fear that an over-reliance on flawed dimensional variables has too often led to the creation of artificial categories in person-oriented research.

To belabor the point: We must be skeptical of our results. If we are to present categories of individuals as taxa, then the groupings created must be consistent with the common scientific meaning of types and classes. We must acknowledge that there are many instances in which dimensions, not categories, are the most appropriate means for representing reality. We must call out instances where false taxonomies are created through person-oriented methods. Researchers who conduct person-oriented research and are not well-versed in taxometrics (see Beauchaine, 2007, for a brief primer), are at risk for misrepresenting the natural order of things.

## Hypothesis testing

I have long struggled to understand hypothesis testing in a person-oriented framework. The goal of creating typologies that exist at levels greater than chance makes sense. But then what? It is all fine and good to identify developmental trajectories of homogeneous subgroups (e.g., mixed modeling) or to cross-tabulate typologies obtained at one time point with typologies from another, but this is rarely sufficient in a field that is increasingly devoted to understanding the antecedents of adjustment outcomes. Perhaps I misunderstand the goal of person-oriented research. If so, I have a lot of company. There is a widespread perception that person-oriented research is heavy on description and light on prediction. Temporal prediction is often the closest thing that many developmental scholars get to asserting causality, so it is essential that we do a better job of advancing and articulating person-oriented strategies for empirical prediction.

Null hypothesis testing appears to be giving way (in psychology) to a new form of statistics emphasizing confidence intervals, effect sizes, estimation, and model fitting. How will the person-oriented field respond? The demise of conventional forms of null hypothesis testing provides adherents of person-oriented analyses with an opportunity to reinvent themselves in the eyes of developmental scholars. As perceptions about the need for null hypothesis testing change, so too will views about the utility of a technique many view as incompatible with null hypothesis testing. But scholars will only consider person-oriented techniques as an alternative to variable-oriented techniques if it is clear that the former are as good (or better) at conforming to the demands of the new statistical order. Estimation is at the heart of the new statistics (Cumming, 2014). The time is ripe for a concerted effort to delineate how person-oriented studies can be designed to adhere to new publication standards and how investigators can readily acquire the results from person-oriented analyses that are necessary for publication. I have lots of questions along these lines. For instance, I am curious to know how types and antitypes can be represented in the language of effect sizes and confidence intervals. To this end, it is my sincere hope that a colleague will soon publish a person-oriented empirical paper that is consistent with the new statistical regime so that I can use it as a template for my future publication endeavors. A primer on obtaining the correct statistical output would be helpful too.

## Concluding Thoughts

The views expressed here are my own. Unlike the building described at the outset, this is not an essay in subtleties. I have no doubt that I have unfairly mischaracterized some aspects of person-oriented thought and practice. The errors and their offense are unintentional. My failure to review the facts, however, was intentional. I have purposefully de-

scribed my flawed perceptions of the person-oriented field without the benefit of fact-checking so that insiders may know what outsiders think. What better way to launch a new journal than to identify areas of miscommunication that need to be addressed? After all of these years, I still don't quite get the person-oriented perspective. But I am convinced that I ought to learn more about it and will turn to these pages in an effort to do so.

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