

Construction of Self's Substantiality through Positioning and Semiotic Means - On the Borders of Becoming

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This commentary article aims at reflecting upon the construction of one's *sense of self's substantiality* through subjective positioning and contextualization of personal semiotic systems (PSSs). Self's substantiality is conceived here as the sensed magnitude or concreteness of one's own self and its relevance for the present issue was derived from the discussions presented by Morais and Guimarães (this issue), and Nassar (this issue) about the notion of psychological border, which focused on (a) the actuality-fictitiousness of personal positions and on (b) the solidity-fluidity *continuum* of positions respectively. Considering the sensed level of self-concreteness as the operational means for discussing self's substantiality, four kinds of positions were depicted: concrete, semiconcrete and quasicongcrete position, and state of depersonalization. Being *psychological borders* conceived here as *affect-laden semiotic complexes*, one's moving from a given felt concrete or semiconcrete position to the state of depersonalization implies in an enduring and tension-laden rupture at any point over the flow of the positioning process, i.e., between the affect-laden appropriation of reality and emerging PSS, or between such affective-semiotic complex and the would-be-taken-on position. Finally, in the emergence of a quasicongcrete position, an identifiable primordial semiotic system sets the meaning-making mind free to signify and feel its perspective so openly that both the emerging PSS and the position related to it configure themselves as, extremely fluid and, by nature, fictitious.

Self's substantiality, i.e., the sensed magnitude of one's own sense of self, is a central self-dimension based on which we actively act in the world. Being conceptually defined, in this article, as the level of sensed self-concreteness, such dimension can be addressed specifically from two double-folded parameters: its *actuality-fictitiousness*, as well as its *solidity-fluidity* nature. From a semiotics-inclusive perspective in psychology, it can be stated that the personally satisfactory structuring of (a) affective experiences, (b) personal sign systems and (c) sensed self-positions is crucial for the satisfactory organization of the sense of self's substantiality. Furthermore, disruptions in such structuring promote variations in the degrees of concreteness at which a given self-position is experienced. In general terms, the currently commented articles address the issue of self-positioning within their discussion of the general notion of psychological borders, focusing, each of them, on diverse issues, respectively: that of

actuality/fictitiousness (Morais & Guimarães, this issue), as well as that of solidity/fluidity (Nassar, this issue) of self-positions. In order to contribute for the refinement to that discussion, this commentary article aims at specifying (a) which affective-semiotic mechanisms are involved in the microprocess of self-positioning as well as (b) how changes in such mechanisms promote variation in a person's sense of self's substantiality. In the next main section, the two commented chapters will be briefly described and some relevant theoretical issues will be raised from such description. Afterwards, the theoretical notions of *concreteness* and *self's substantiality* will be articulated. Finally, in the third main section, the process of self-positioning, from a semiotic-psychological perspective will be depicted and, subsequently, two specific processes of variation in one's sense of self's substantiality will be described.

PSYCHOLOGICAL BORDERS AS CONSTITUENTS OF BOTH THE POSITIONING PROCESS AND THE REPERTOIRE OF SELF-POSITIONS

In her reflections on the nature and on the possible variations of one's sense of self, Nassar (this issue) addressed the notion of psychological border through the issue of self-volatility *versus* self-stability, being such border conceived as a clear, satisfactory and well-defined sense of identity when it is in its most evident or identifiable form. On the other hand, Morais and Guimarães (this issue) depicted the psychological border mainly as a sensed region of intra and intersubjective movement, whereas exploring that construct via the issue of self-multiplicity through dialogicality and imagination. In general terms, Nassar (this issue) calls our attention to three relevant issues: (a) the nature of what can be named a psychological border, (b) a continuum along which such border can be experienced intrapsychologically in a more or less definable and satisfactory way and (c) *how* such experiential variation takes place. For the author, two central aspects of the border transformation process are emotional destabilization and one's deliberate reflection upon one's own lived experiences. Such personal reflections, in their turn, make it possible for the person to restore emotional stability and to reappropriate their sense of self. However, the aforementioned personal active reflection can be explored in a more detailed way and, therefore, depicted in a more precise fashion and generalized terms than *construction of significant links through personal interpretation of lived experiences* as well as *re-storying of one's life narrative*. What is at stake here is: *which are (at least, some of) the psychological mechanisms involved in the person's repositioning movements?* It can be argued here that the very deliberate act of *creating significant links* or *reinterpreting lived experiences* in the move from one given *quality of personal position* towards another implies in the going through a psychological experience which necessarily lies on basic mechanisms, which will be explored in the section entitled *Self-Positioning through Affective-Semiotic Means*. Such subjective movement between qualitatively different personal positions is also addressed by Morais and Guimarães (this issue), though regarding a slightly diverse self-dimension, i.e.,

considering the dynamics between actual-fictitious, instead of between solid-fluid, intrapersonal alterities. By dealing with a specific kind of internal self-multiplicity (*actual-fictitious* internal self-positions), Morais and Guimarães (this issue) propose the following twofold mental movement which mediate both the existence of such diverse subjective stances and their dialogical relationship: being concretely present in a given setting while getting to distancing oneself from that very objective reality. Thus, continuously crossing *perceptive* and *imaginative* borders is crucial for the co-emergence of positions which hold different statuses related to their level of actuality or fictitiousness. In this sense, there is a double frontier to be crossed by the person in the creation of self-multiplicity and inner dialogue, being one of these frontiers related to person and external environment (*actor-written play*, for instance) and, the other, regarding diverse intrapersonal alterities (e.g., *actor-character*). Here, again, the issue of which psychological mechanisms enable the person to go back and forth along the actuality-fictitiousness *continuum* is still a point to be addressed, just like in the case of Nassar's study (this issue). That is to say, being *imagination* central to the occurrence of self-multiplicity and inner dialogue, *which specific basic psychological mechanisms can make imagination, in this case, possible?* From what has been stated so far, it can be posited that the *level of concreteness* is sensed as being a highly relevant characteristic of positioning in what concerns to personal autonomy¹, since we are always reflecting (and working) on the specific goal-oriented perspective from which we act in the world. In addition to that, such feature (level of concreteness) can be conceived as being composed of double-folded sub-dimensions, being *rigidity-volatility* and *actuality-fictitiousness*² two of them, as suggested by the currently commented articles.

The positioning experience can be theoretically conceived in a *continuum* regarding its degrees of concreteness, which are composed of the previously mentioned sub-dimensions. Such multidimensionality characterizes what is termed here *sense of self's substantiality*, i.e., "the subjective sense of the magnitude of the self" (Duval, Silvia & Lalwani, 2012). Keeping our focus of interest on the discussion of *psychological borders*, more precisely on the aforementioned issues raised by Morais and Guimarães (this issue), and Nassar (this issue), the psychological process of emergence and dissolution of self's substantiality turns out to be of primordial relevance for the current discussion. In this sense, the

¹ A relevant discussion on the issue of personal autonomy (and its relation to the collective realm) from a semiotic perspective is presented by Colapietro (1989), in his presentation of Peirce's reflections on *inwardness* and *autonomy*. In this sense, autonomy is attained through the power of consciousness, of action and cultivation of ideas, being the first one of them of special interest for the present article.

² There is no distinction of the real-unreal kind, when the dyad *actual-fictitious* is mentioned in this article. So, for instance, both an actor's body and a character's life trajectory are real existents from the standpoint of the experiencing actor performing a play.

discussion proposed in this commentary article aims at addressing the issue of self's substantiality from a semiotic perspective in psychology, trying to depict how a certain psychological mechanism (affect-driven and sign-mediated personal positioning) makes it possible for the person to move along a continuum of more or less fluid sense of self. It is extremely important to highlight at this point that *semiosis*, in its classical Peircean conception as sign functioning³, is assumed to be the main via through which imaginative processes can mediate subjective changes, such as one's positioning and repositioning over time and across diverse contexts. In order to so, the following topics will be addressed in the next sections: the notion of self-concreteness and its integration within the idea of self's substantiality, and semiotics-inclusive psychological mechanisms involved in positioning processes (see subsection entitled *Emergence of Sensed Concrete Positions Mediated by Affective-Semiotic Complexes*); in the last main section, with the purpose of narrowing down our discussion and keeping on addressing the issues raised by the commented articles, it will be presented an analysis of how self's substantiality changes in two specific conditions: that which occurs from a sensed concrete position to a state of depersonalization and that which happens from a concrete to a quasicongcrete position.

SENSE OF SELF-CONCRETENESS AS THE CORE CHARACTERISTIC OF SELF'S SUBSTANTIALITY

Self-Concreteness: an Outcome of the Experienced Solidity/Volatility and Actuality/Fictitiousness in One's Sense of Self

In people's everyday interactions, the precise definition of one's subjective position at each moment seems to be quite an irrelevant issue for practical purposes, until it is necessary to do so and some impediment disrupts their attempts to make it explicit. That is to say, we simply take for granted that the subjective perspective from which we interact is well-known (at least by us), irrespectively of how subtle such assumption is. The act of deliberately differentiating one's own perspective, to a greater or lesser extent, implies in conceiving a minimally discrete subjective stance which is *sensed as* concrete, in terms of *specificity*, by the experiencing mind. So, the term *concrete* is used here in its usual sense, to refer to a specific or particular case which fits a person's criteria of reality - in this sense, the term *concrete* is a predicate of a given (assumed or sensorily verifiable) reality that someone wishes to grant a privilege to (Chaplin, 1981, p.99; Abbagnano, 2000, p. 170). Thus, it is reasonable to think that the more a self-position is sensed as concrete in a given interactional context, the more someone feels autonomous regarding their feelings, thoughts and actions within

³ According to Peirce's (1958) own definition, a sign is here considered as "an object which is in relation to its object in the one hand and to an interpretant on the other, in such a way as to bring the interpretant into a relation to the object" (8.332). Such *triadic cooperation* characterizes semiosis, or sign-activity.

such context. As previously noted, it is assumed here that such self-concreteness can be experienced at diverse degrees of intensity, being such variation founded upon the extent to which the person can (a) recognize, label and define their own position at a certain moment, as well as (b) anchor such position embodied social roles played by themselves in their social environment. In more general terms, we can say that the former issue is related to one's experienced level of solidity or volatility of a given position, whereas the latter has to do with that of actuality or fictitiousness of it. Thus, a self-position which is experienced as more firm ends up being more easily recognizable, getting to be more easily labeled and defined by the person, being such relation one of a feed-back kind. That is to say, as we get to represent a blurry subjective experience through the use of signs, it will tend to be felt as something more outlined, with more precise contour and with a subjectively sensed solidity nature. On the other hand, having difficulties in stating from which standpoint one's feelings, thoughts and actions emerge leads the person to experience, metaphorically, a subjective fluidity in their sense of self. In what concerns to the nature of actuality-fictitiousness of a self-position (the second parameter from which concreteness is approached in this article), the following main argument is worth being highlighted for a start: the embodied nature of one's sense of self is crucial for the occurrence of agentive self-consciousness and self-awareness^{4 5}. So, it is assumed here that the more a position is attached to a socially-played role, the more actual it tends to be sensed, whereas positions which are taken on at a given context without being directly related to the role played at that very moment are sensed as *less actual* or *more fictitious*. Such two sub-dimensions (level of volatility and of actuality) of the self-concreteness dimension can combine in different ways, making it possible the emergence of a myriad of degrees of concreteness as outcomes. For the purposes of the present discussion on psychological borders, generated by Morais and Guimarães' (this issue), and Nassar's (this issue) elaborations, four conditions will be approached as it follows: a) Concrete position – any discrete self-representation which “appears clearly as an entity in consciousness”, being “a relatively homogeneous internal representation” (Duval, Silvia & Lalwani, 2012). In addition, its emergence is both strongly derived from, and associated with, the role played by the person as it emerges. Besides, it is in consonance with the actual role played by the person at a given interpersonal interaction; in this sense, the self-positioning is strictly attached to the context-bound embodied self. b) Semiconcrete position – any discrete and relatively homogeneous self-representation which emerges clearly as *another me* in consciousness. However, it is generated out of an embodied social role *other than that which is taken on by the person at a given moment* - hence it can

⁴ It is worth mentioning that, in Psychology, there is a longstanding tradition of discussion on the sense of self's embodied nature, ranging from James's (1890/1918) founding classical definition of the Material Self, to contemporary elaborations, such as those proposed by Hermans (2012).

⁵ Self-consciousness is considered here as “dispositional self-focus” and self-awareness, “the capacity to take oneself as the object of thought” (Silvia & Duval, 2001, p. 230; 238).

be thought of as a *half-concrete* position. Thus, it is contextualized in an ongoing interaction in which the role played by the person is not its main foundation. In this case, the social role played and the agentive position do not coincide, in spite of any relations that there might be between them. c) Quasiconcrete position – it tends to be taken on through intense imaginative elaboration, due to the fact that it does not have an actual counterpart in one’s repertoire of social roles, being it an existent *only* in the realm of imagination. Despite being personally *real*, as any other position, quasiconcrete positions are strongly fictitious in their nature, having their own definition considerably blurred, which makes it difficult for someone to refer to them in precise terms, mainly when considered diachronically. In this case, at each time the person takes such a position on, extremely varied versions of it might emerge. d) State of depersonalization – it is a subjective phenomenon in which the person goes through an experience of unreality in their sense of self, frequently associated with derealization, which is the experience of unreality of the outside world (Sierra, 2009). In such condition, the person feels *as if* they were cut-off from the external environment, difficulties in remembering and imagining are experienced, there is also a difficulty in feeling emotions and, especially important for the present discussion, a strong sensation of disembodiment, *as if* the person were dead or automaton-like (Sierra, 2009). Nassar (this issue) focused on the subjective moving from a concrete position to a state of depersonalization, whereas the moving from a concrete to a quasi-concrete position was addressed by Morais and Guimarães (this issue). In the next subsection, this multilevel depiction of self-concreteness will be put in the terms of James’s *Components of the Self* (1890/1918), in order to substantiate the relevance of the notion of *sensed self-concreteness* for our present discussion.

William James’s *Components of the Self* and the Historical Relevance of the Self’s Substantiality Issue

The issue of how concrete one’s sense of self can be experienced is a longstanding one, whose modern roots in psychology can be traced to James’ (1890/1918) classical elaboration of *the Self’s constituents* (material, social and spiritual Self, and the pure Ego). In that foundational formulation, James (1890/1918) depicts the self as a multifaceted phenomenon whose constituents vary from those very *concrete* and easily detectable ones (such as one’s own body, clothes, house, etc.), to more intrapersonal self-constituents, i.e., the spiritual self (enduring psychic dispositions, such as one’s ability to argue and discriminate, moral sensibility, etc.), to those more interpersonal and less concrete ones (one’s images as they are cultivated and shared by significant social others). In addition to that, there is also an even less concrete (in terms of specificity) constituent of the self, the Pure Ego, which is a given infinitesimally small section of the flow of consciousness from which the person can experience their inner and outer worlds, being such personal nucleus of experience (the Jamesian *I*) not susceptible of being thought of, except

when it stops being the processing consciousness of the person's subjective experience and turns into the person's own object of thought.

The currently claimed relevance of the notion of self's substantiality is made clear, for instance, when James (1890/1918) points out that "only when [one's enduring psychic dispositions which constitute the spiritual self] are altered is a man said to be *alienatus a se*" (p. 296). Thus, by keeping in mind James's inaugural formulations on the sense of self's multidimensionality, more contemporary discussions on it (such as the objective self awareness and the dialogical self theories⁶ in the second half of the 20th century) and, more specifically, the issues raised in the two articles presently commented, the following three ideas are specially relevant for the discussion proposed in this commentary article:

a) The subjective sense of *self's substantiality* is central to the broad notions of personhood and personal autonomy.

b) The *concreteness dimension* is a reasonable parameter for the theoretical exploration of self's substantiality.

c) Such sensed self-concreteness is susceptible to fluctuations in what concerns to the degrees at which it can be experienced, being it the basis upon which one's *sense of self-concreteness* is constructed.

It is exactly the aforementioned constructionist nature of the process of self-concreteness emergence that will be addressed from this point on. So, in the next section, two topics will be addressed in details: (a) the semiotic-psychological mechanism involved in the positioning process, which leads to the emergence of a *typical and minimally concrete position* and (b) how changes in such mechanism mediate the emergence of the state of depersonalization and a quasicrete position.

SELF-POSITIONING THROUGH AFFECTIVE-SEMIOTIC MEANS – THE MAKING OF DIVERSE DEGREES OF SELF'S SUBSTANTIALITY

Emergence of Sensed Concrete Positions Mediated by Affective-Semiotic Complexes

We *subjectively* move, at any given dialogical interaction (be it intra or intersubjective), through a complex process in which affective arousal triggers sign emergence and functioning towards a given subjective direction, functioning such affective-semiotic fields as guiders of the intertwined mechanisms of self-positioning and contextualized sign use⁷. Such positioning and sign use, in their turn, contribute to one's reorganization of the experienced affective field, as well as of perceptive and externalized actions, configuring an endless feed-forwarding

⁶ See Duval, Silvia and Lalwani (2012), Hermans (1996; 2012), Hermans, Kempen and van Loon (1992), and Valsiner and Cabell (2012) for instance.

⁷ For the purposes of this article, only the first mechanism, *self-positioning*, will be addressed.

inward-outward subjective movement. In the self-positioning process, the *I*, i.e., that ill definable current section of consciousness, at a given present moment (James, 1890/1918), interacts with its context in a way that a sign complex (assumed predicates of the *I* and representations regarding a related sphere of experience) mediates one's taking on a more or less definite personal position. That is to say that *the experiencing I* takes on socially situated personal positions through the mediation of (ontogenetically cultivated) meaningful sets of signs as these emerge in a present interaction. In this sense, we feel the world as we interact with it at each fraction of second, and, out of such interactions, the affective atmosphere within which signs are set in motion, in the realm of our mental life, emerges. Such signs may range from those which have been long cultivated by us (such as our longstanding ideas of fairness or honor) to more situational and disposable ones, functioning all of them in such an orchestrated way that some of them are *felt as* more relevant than others. In addition to that, mediating signs at a given experience tend to be closely related to the person's area of life within which that very singular experience is considered to belong to. It is noteworthy, however, that such personal semiotic sub-systems may be set into motion in situations others than those closely related to their genetic sphere of experience. This social-situatedness, along with the previously mentioned hierarchical organization, characterize what is named here as a personal semiotic sub-system (PSS)⁸. In the end, being able to label satisfactorily such personal perspective is what makes it be initially felt as minimally *concrete*.

What is relevant here for the present discussion is that as we subjectively move along our ordinary experiences over time, affective arousals trigger the activation of certain semiotic sub-systems, which, for their part, pave the way, so to speak, for the occurrence of the phenomena of self-positioning.

PROCESSES OF VARIATION IN THE SENSE OF *SELF-CONCRETENESS*

The Differentiation Between the Two Extremes of the Concreteness *Continuum* – Emergence of Depersonalization as a Tentative Metapositioning Regarding a Nonpositioning.

The general mechanism of self-positioning described in the previous subsection gives us some hints of how the phenomenon of variation in the levels of experienced concreteness regarding one's sense of self can be made possible. So, by keeping in mind the notion of the *I as the thinker*, the state of depersonalization can be thought of as the result of a break in the sequence of psychological processes which let us move from the nondifferentiated sense of *I* to the minimally differentiated condition of being in a certain position. More specifically, we can say that even though the experiencing *I* keeps appropriating the world for itself in the

⁸ The hierarchical organization of all of one's PSSs characterizes is assumed to integrate what Valsiner (2007) defines as *personal semiotic system* or *personal culture*.

depersonalization condition, it occurs in such a self-detached way that the person: (a) faces difficulty in appropriate their own taking on of a self-position, i.e., the person gets unable to state which general personal perspective lies beneath a given action and (b) keeps being able to mentally appropriate such sense of strangeness regarding themselves. Thus, we can say that depersonalization is a *tentative metapositioning regarding a nonpositioning*.

Another relevant feature of the positioning process for the discussion of the core characteristic of self's substantiality, i.e., sense of self-concreteness, is the role played by the constant affective readiness which permeates humans' navigation within their worlds. In the case of depersonalization, as an affective experience evolves over time, there is an escalation of its intensity in such a way that no differentiated semiotic subsystem happens to emerge within one's intrasubjective reality. As a consequence, such extreme widening of the affective field's borders promotes a prolonged experiencing of an undifferentiated personal perspective which, in the end, contributes back to the intensification of the affective experience. What is at stake here is the experienced consonance or dissonance, *from the person's own perspective*, between the emerging personal semiotic subsystem and the affective experience out of which it emerges. Another possible severe disruption in the self-positioning process is that in which one's dominant self-position, despite its relatively satisfactory configuration, finds no room for interpersonal concrete interchanges in the realm of personally relevant spheres of experience. In sum, we can say that the state of depersonalization can emerge out of relevant disruptions in the process of: (a) making a minimal differentiation of any initially fuzzy affective experience; (b) *feeling* such an affective state from a minimally specific and rather significant personal perspective which, in its turn, is merged with a given set of signs; (c) exerting deliberate actions, from a given position stance, within relevant contexts and towards significant social others.

The Specific Functioning of the Positioning Mechanism in the Emergence of Quasiconcrete Positions.

The first main feature of the process of emergence of a quasiconcrete position (such as that of a character in a play or a professional role in a child's daydream) is that there is always a somewhat identifiable primordial semiotic system out of which an also primordial affective field emerges. Be it a written play, an idea regarding a given character's personality, or parental voices related to a given profession within a child's repertoire of self-positions, at each time such semiotic systems are *activated*, so to speak, in one's intrasubjective realm, certain recurrent affective fields tend to be experienced. However, there exists a quite wide range of possibilities for the person to deal with such primordial semiotic systems, which makes the person free to imaginatively approach them in so many ways that the affective outcome may vary rather broadly - in this sense, there is almost no rigid commitment between the experiencing mind and extrasubjective elements like a written play or a dreamt-of occupation. At this point, one may

experience the whole semiotic-affective field so overwhelmingly, that it gets close to that experienced by someone in the depersonalized state. But, contrary to the depersonalization condition, the semiotic subsystem which emerges out of the affective experience, in the present case, is closely related to the one which precedes the emergence of such affective field. Consequently, a rather fluid (yet, to a lesser degree, also rigid) fictitious position emerges and dominates one's intrasubjective scenario, being its fluidity explained by the fact that the person can exert a highly agentive and playful role upon the primordial semiotic system to which that position is related; therefore, the emergent affective field is considerably freed from ordinary, daily-life constraints, feed-forwarding the openness of the experiential field. It is this initial intense openness of the semiotic-affective field to personal appropriation that guarantees flexibility to the making of fictitious self's components through fictitious means. On the other hand, the minimal (yet functional) solidity of the emerging fictitious position is made possible by the fact that the primordial semiotic system outlines, in rather general terms, what the emerging position *is likely to be* right from the very beginning of the positioning process. Such outlining is translated in the fact that the semiotic system which emerges with the affective experience ends up being considerably guided by that primordial semiotic system.

FINAL REMARKS

Self-positioning, as a *process*, can be conceived as a multidimensional phenomenon, being *self's substantiality* one of its central dimensions. In operational terms, substantiality was approached here through the notion of *level of concreteness*, which, in its turn, was formulated in terms of a position's *actuality-fictitiousness* and sensed *solidity-fluidity*. However, it was argued here that all of these specificities of self-positions cannot account for the process-based nature of the target phenomena. Thus, addressing microaspects of the subjective movement of positioning, by considering affective and semiotic mechanisms was considered necessary for a more generalized understanding of how specific mechanisms can account for the emergence of the feeling of self-concreteness, to a more or lesser degree. Departing from the discussions proposed by Morais and Guimarães (this issue) and Nassar (this issue), two positioning movements were taken as objects of reflection: that from a concrete position to a depersonalized subjective state, as well as that from a concrete to a quasicongcrete position. In both cases, the idea of *psychological border* was depicted as an affect-laden semiotic complex, composed by a personal semiotic subsystem *and* the sense of being someone intrinsically related to such semiotic subsystem. Changes in the orchestration of the basic elements of such subjective (*affect* \leftrightarrow *sign system* \leftrightarrow *sensed position*) complex can thus account for the variations at the degrees to which one feels their sense of self *concrete*. In spite of the contextualized functionality of diverse degrees of self's substantiality, what matters here is the contribution of the exploration of such changes and their outcomes for a truly developmental and generalized understanding of a variety of psychological phenomena which vary from

imagination in children's play, to artistic performances, to deindividuation, to the extreme experience of depersonalization.

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