

# HUMAN PREDISPOSITIONS AND PERSONAL COMPETENCES

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## Abstract

*The topic of personal psychology is presented from a perspective of achievements in humanistic psychology (M. Kinget), proprium psychology (G. Allport), personalistic psychology (J. DuBois), and also with reference to the assumptions of the Self-Determination Theory of E. Deci and R. Ryan. Nonetheless, a particular subject of interest are the assumptions of W. Stern's personalistic approach crucial in psychology and its way of psychological interpretation of natural, human personal predispositions, which are the basis of development of personal competences to perform specifically human activities. With reference to W. Stern's conception of the person as the subject of psychological analysis, I present a model of the dimensions of the structure of dispositions of the human person as a proactive subject. Next, I point to the possibility of formulating research hypotheses and their empirical verification in the scope of individual differences between empirically distinguished character types, which are described after Stern as determinants of personal life orientations in the dimension of cooperation – self-preservation.*

**Keywords:** agency subject, character, person, personality, personalistic approach, personal disposition.

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## Introduction

The topic of the human being's personal nature still seems to be rather a subject of philosophy than psychology. Modern academic psychology, since the time of Wilhelm Wundt (1832 – 1920), most often treated as one of the natural sciences, has been oriented to a great extent at describing and explaining biological and environmental determinants of human and animal behavior. An exception to this was the work of William Stern, especially his handbook: *General Psychology from the Personalistic Standpoint* (New York, 1938). G. W. Allport (1953) promoted this kind of approach in personalistic psychology, describing himself as “person-centered”. In the years 1950 – 1970, there was a significant increase of psychologists' interest in the topic concerning the person in the wide trend of humanistic psychology. C. Rogers (1955) formulated the challenging question: *Persons or science?* He also made an attempt to establish empirical foundations in professing academic personal psychology, which he presented in the work under the notable title: *Becoming a Person* (1961). M. Kinget, cooperating with Rogers, made an effort to systematize the views of representatives of the humanistic orientation, stating the following: The focus of humanistic psychology is upon specificity of man, upon that which sets him apart from all other species. It differs from other psychologies because it views man not solely as a biological organism modified by experience and culture but as a person, a symbolic entity capable of pondering his existence, of lending it meaning and direction. (Kinget, 1975, p. v).

Among specifically human personal characteristics, Kinget distinguished: reflective consciousness, historical and prospective awareness as a sense of time, and symbolic capacity as a key to man's uniqueness, culture making, interpersonal creativity, freedom and responsibility, self-transcendence, ultimate concern, and religious behavior.

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In the 1990's, James Dubois adopted a personalistic approach in psychology in *The Nature and Tasks of a Personalist Psychology* (1995), published under his editorship. The assumptions of this approach were published in the form of an appendix to the book published under J. Dubois (1997) which was titled, "*Philosophical Principles of the Institute for Personalist Psychology (IPP)*". The ten principles of IPP are: (1) *The nature of evidence (...)*, as any way in which a truth reveals itself (...) as one approaches peculiarly personal phenomena such as love, freedom, ethical action, and religious practice; (2) *Human beings as personal beings (...)* must not be viewed simply as "higher animals" but must be seen in their specifically personal dimension; (3) *The spiritual dimension* of the human person; (4) *The objectivity of values*; (5) *Rationality*. It arises from the ability of persons to transcend themselves and respond to reality appropriately; (6) *Human freedom*; (7) *Moral responsibility*; (8) *The religious dimension*; (9) *The limitations of the human person*; (10) *Society and the family*. Human beings are social by nature, and develop intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and morally within a variety of social settings. (Cf. Uchnast, 2002).

However significant the assumptions of personal psychology formulated by M. Kinget are, as well as of the founders of IPP, it nonetheless seems that we still lack a coherent psychological theory on the basis of which the postulated trends in psychological research can be realized, research hypotheses formulated and tested with the aid of empirical methods. I believe that the propositions of William Stern (1871 - 1938) in this respect, presented in *General Psychology from the Personalistic Standpoint* (New York, 1938), are still valid. In the introduction to this work he stated that he strives to develop psychology as a science about the person who is able to *have experience*.

### **William Stern's conception of psychology as a science of the human person**

Stern (1923, 1930) stated that the category of person enables a holistic understanding of the complexity of the living being as a unity in multiplicity (*unitas multiplex*) of physical, vital, psychic, and specifically human, that is, spiritual characteristics. This unity, according to Stern, is formed and perfected in the process of interaction of the living being with its surroundings. Thus, assuming the concept of *person* as the primary determinant of a psychological research perspective, Stern (1938) described it as follows:

The "person" is a living whole, individual, unique, striving toward goals, self-contained and yet open to the world around him; he is capable of having experience. (p. 70)

Commenting on the above description of the person, Stern drew particular attention to the fact that he considers all of the characteristics of the person as a living whole, with the exception of the predisposition to *have experience* as compulsory, that is, as a result of either a biological or psychic mechanism in reactive behaviors, or merely in the release of internal psychophysical energy. Meanwhile, the predisposition to *have experience* is prerequisite for differentiation and development of specifically human personal dispositions that are manifested in the ability to recognize meaningful objects or situations in life which are possible to achieve in one's environment. This ability is interpreted by Stern (1939, p. vii) as a characteristic of an overall orientation of the person to close or distant aims which are objectively meaningful to him, or a challenge posed by the environment. Therefore, in his view, the ability to *have experience* correlates with a specifically human openness to the surrounding world, which affords an increase in both internal coherence, and one's own ability for their adequate realization.

The human person, *having experience* of objectively meaningful purposes in the world surrounding him, reveals volitional dispositions in realizing them, even in situations of encountered difficulties or obstacles. Of particular significance for Stern in this regard were

observations of the developmental process of Helen Keller, who from the age of 18 months was deaf and blind. Stern (1905, 1910) stated that a turning point in her life was the discovery of the ability to communicate with her environment through the sense of touch. Developing and improving this ability, she ceased to be hyperactive and difficult to raise, learned sign language and verbal language, and successfully completed her higher education. Not only had the coherence and direction of her inner experience changed, but also her surrounding world. In her original world of casual and chaotic stimuli and experiences, the scope of a convergent world of meanings, values, goals, and challenges had become distinguished and expanded. Helen Keller, as a living personal whole which was co-created by the world of possessed experiences and her world of meanings, challenges, objectives, and ways of their realization, was for Stern convincing evidence of specifically human personal abilities, which could be manifested and actualized in a manner adequate in interpersonal and social relationships. The human person thus appears as a *unitas multiplex*, consciously developing in the process of convergent interactions with the environment.

### **Kurt Goldstein's concept of specifically human predispositions in abstract behavior**

The conception of personal dispositions as described above can refer to the natural human approach to *abstract behavior* as conceived by K. Goldstein, which manifests itself in the ability to broaden the scope of freedom in choosing a preferred and suitable way of actualizing oneself in a given situation, to go beyond the limitations of a specific situation, and to think in terms of "possibilities".

Goldstein (1940, p. 62), a psychiatrist, found that patients with a damaged brain reveal a complete dependence on immediate stimuli of the external environment. These patients seem to be so fused with their surroundings that, like animals, they are not able to maintain a distance in relation to them, to separate themselves from them. The result is not only a "*shrinking*" of their personalities, but also of their world of experiences. Goldstein referred to this kind of behavior as *concrete behavior*.

Meanwhile, the functioning of healthy people, according to Goldstein, is characterized not only by broadening the range of perception and understanding it from different perspectives, but also of the ability to evaluate and select a strategy that is most adequate and effective in the realization of chosen objectives. Goldstein described such behavior as either *abstract behavior*, or an *abstract attitude*.

Goldstein mentioned that he had doubts about the use of the word "abstract" in this instance. Nonetheless, according to Goldstein, the abstract attitude enables a broader comprehensive understanding of the range of behavior, and thus broadens the range of possible choices of more appropriate behavior in a given situation.

Furthermore, Goldstein concluded that the abstract attitude is one of the primary forms of organization of behavior of every normally functioning, healthy human person. In this sense, actions of a specific nature performed by a healthy human individual, i.e., of one free of organic brain damage, have their origin in the ability to assume an abstract approach to the whole of one's situation, the choice of appropriate forms of behavior, and control of their course. Nonetheless, in situations of particular risk to the individual, a healthy person may also reveal a tendency for specific behavior which, because of the exceptional nature of those situations, Goldstein described as "catastrophic reactions."

A total distinction and qualitative differences between these two forms of organization of human behavior were the subject of particular emphasis on the part of Goldstein (1940, p. 60): Even in its simplest form [...] abstraction is separate in principle from concrete behavior.

There is no gradual transition from the one to the other. Abstract attitude is not distinguished only by a greater degree of complexity by introducing a new factor determining behavior; it is actually a completely different activity of the organism.

In any case, Goldstein also mentions that some healthy people exhibit a tendency for specific forms of behavior. However, these persons, if the need arises, are also able to move to a higher level of organization of behavior that is characteristic of an abstract attitude. On the other hand, for pathological individuals, i.e., for patients with brain damage, it is completely impossible to achieve, even in situations where they are provided with external assistance in this regard. Moreover, Goldstein found that in healthy individuals specific behavior is, in a certain way, based on the ability for an abstract attitude with reference to a given life situation. Thus, he regarded it as a basic precondition for every specific human behavior.

### **Gordon Allport's conception of the personal knowing subject**

Allport (1988) considered certain important elements of psychological analysis of the personal ability to have experience in his own conception of personality development as a process of becoming an individuality through the actualization of that which is most personal (the *proprium*). Allport distinguished eight functions of the *proprium*: a sense of one's own body, a sense of identity, self-love, the extended self, being rational, self-image, personal aspirations and being a knowing subject, while he regarded the last function of the *proprium* – being a knowing subject – as the central and most personal function of the self.

Having distinguished between the (first seven) different functions of the *proprium* (and we can regard all as particularly our own), we can consider whether the subject has been exhausted. Do we not also have a cognitive self – a knowing entity, which is beyond all the other functions of the *proprium* and keeps an eye on them? (p. 46)

We learn not only things, but also the empirical traits of our own *proprium*. It is I who has bodily sensations, I sense my own identity from one day to another, *I am aware* of my will power, the expansion of my own self, of my own rationalizations, interests and aspirations. So when I think about the functions of my *proprium*, I easily see that they occur together, and sense that they are closely related to cognitive function itself (Allport, 1988, p. 47, emphasis by ZU).

Of particular importance is the fact that Allport regarded the subjective cognitive function of the *proprium* as the central function of the human personality. Its development, according to Allport, is prerequisite for such cooperation of all the functions of personality, and ultimately the human being as a living whole, a specific human person, has a sense of being an agency subject.

The individual may therefore possess a sense of *having experience*, rather than being only an expression of a casual course of sensations in the stream of consciousness – in as much as he accepts the various aspects (functions) of his own personality (*proprium*) and treats each of these functions as a partial manifestation of himself and a co-created personal coherence and unity in multiplicity (*unitas multiplex*).

### **The Self-Determination Theory of E. L. Deci and R. M. Ryan**

Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000) stress the importance of the primary nature of intrinsic motivation, referring to K. Goldstein's (1938, 1940) organismic approach in the psychology of self-actualization, and R. White's conception (1959) of the need for abilities as a basic category in the psychology of motivation.

Intrinsic motivation stimulates and maintains spontaneous behavior, action motivated by curiosity, novelty, importance of challenges and personally meaningful activities, expanding the range of one's abilities to act effectively, or simply from the satisfaction of acting effectively in a certain direction and in a certain way. Meanwhile, external motivation is stimulated directly or indirectly by external factors that control the way and direction of behavior not only through coercion or passive imitation of patterns, but also through a mechanism of causal conditioning, that is, by selective rewarding or punishing.

Intrinsic motivation, according to Deci and Ryan, is expressed in three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relationships with others (relatedness), i.e. bonds, belonging, and community with others. Developing and meeting all these needs, according to Deci and Ryan, is prerequisite for normal development and a well-being.

The basic distinguished needs are treated in the SDT as complementary, and therefore their adequate development and realization are a condition for the growth of internal integrity. For example, the need for autonomy is fulfilled and developed not only with the increase of one's independence from others and one's own sense of authorship, but also because of the need for adequate relationships with others, through an increased capacity for cooperation and responsibility for competent realization of undertaken roles and commitments towards others.

### **The Human person as an individual structure of possibilities of actualizing oneself and development in a world of values: Towards a synthesis**

Referring to W. Stern's psychological approach to the human person, I describe him not only as a living entity, but also as a conscious human existence, an individual structure of possibilities of different ways of experiencing meanings and activities in the world lived by the person, possessing natural abilities to maintain internal coherence and openness to the surrounding world, to actualize his developmental potentialities and improvement of his activity in relation to preferred values and objectives, especially in dialogical interpersonal and community relationships.

Personal abilities are defined as basic human natural potentialities in adequate personal experience and action whose actualization and development depend particularly on a given person's own activity in the world he experiences.

Thus, in understanding the human being in terms of his natural personal dispositions, we define him not so much in terms of categories distinguished in a given philosophical system which define the essence of human nature, but rather in terms of his specific dispositions in ways of being, whose actualization or inhibition, or their development depends to a great extent on their subject, i.e. the specific person. Therefore, personal dispositions are considered as basic and natural as those which are described in general psychology as human dispositions for abstract behavior (K. Goldstein), or human innate *universal grammar*, which is the basis for the development of language dispositions for symbolic communication (N. Chomsky, 1957).

Below (Fig. 1) I present a model of the dimensions of the natural structure of dispositions of the human person as a subject operating in the surrounding world, oriented at an increase of internal coherence and at effective realization of meaningful goals, values, and challenges of the surrounding world.

The proposed model of the structure of natural dispositions of the human person should be read from the center, i.e. assuming the central position of the subject possessing the ability for different ways of having experiences and action (agency subject). Such an entity should not be understood as a kind of homunculus, or mental apparatus, of which Freud

wrote. The personal agency subject is a living, functional whole, a symbolic existence (Kinget, 1975), a living individual Gestalt, internally coherent and open to the same as others. The psychic and personal dispositions which co-create him are integrated and organized by the personal agency subject. Dispositions of the person, as understood from this primary perspective, therefore, are those which the acting person has at his disposition, i.e. which can be used by him in terms of realizing preferred objectives or undertaken tasks and challenges of life.

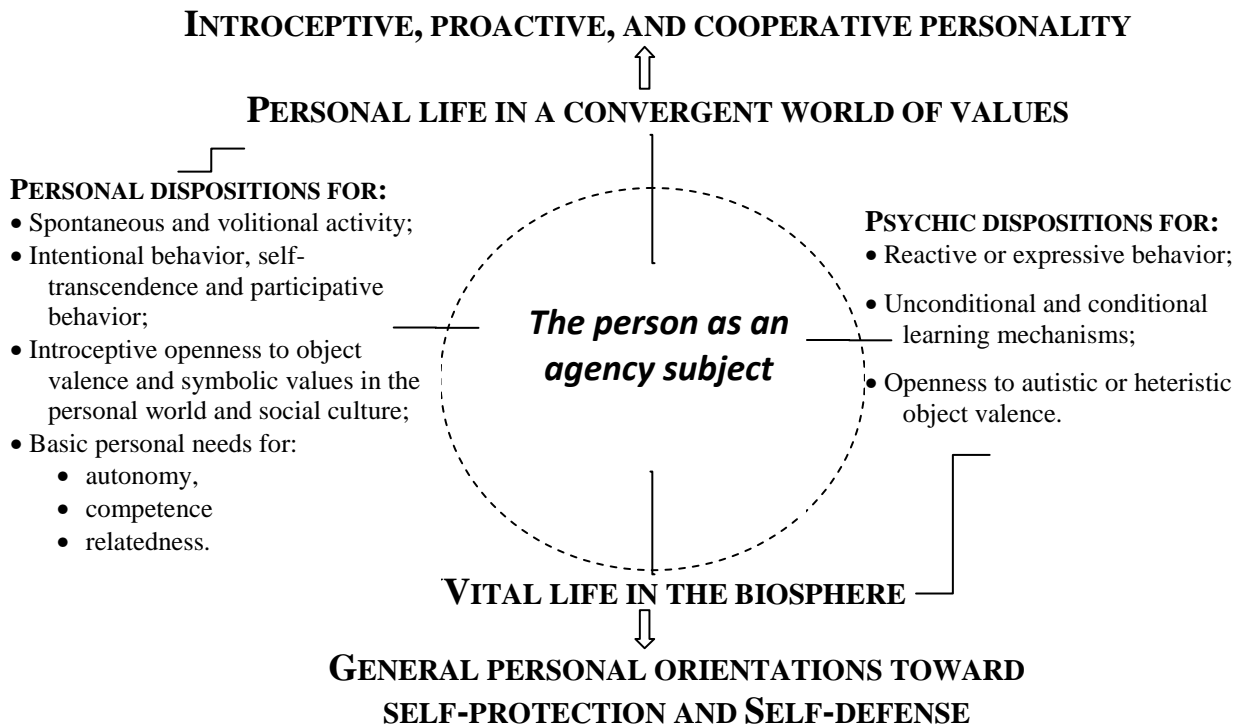


Figure 1. Dimensional model of the structure of natural dispositions of the human person as a proactive agency subject. (Drawn up by ZU)

The human person, with the ability to have experience of possibilities, to realize his potential either through actualization of his psychic and biological dispositions, or through actualization of his own personal dispositions to a receptive openness to the world of values, shapes the volitional dispositions proper to himself, his individual character. W. Stern distinguished two main orientations of character in this respect as a basis for determining psychological differences of individuals: (a) orientation to self-protection and self-defense in the world which is strange, dangerous, or threatening to oneself, and (b) orientation to introception of the sense of symbolic values in the surrounding world, establishing close relationships and interaction with others, and a willingness to take on challenges of life. Stern (1938, p. 439) regarded these two personality orientations as a basis for a typology of character, distinguishing three basic types: the autistic (self-preservation, self-development), heteristic (hypertelic, syntelic, ideotelic), and introceptive character as an ideal type. Stern's typology was of theoretical and intuitive nature. Nonetheless, with the help of Uchnast's Action Styles Questionnaire (KSD), one can distinguish similar types of character in the dimension of interaction – self-protection. Currently, empirical verification is being conducted of the diagnostic effectiveness of KSD and the measurement of personality correlates

of empirically distinguished character types (Uchnast, 2008; Brachowicz and Chemperek, 2009; Bulzak and Celińska-Miszczuk, 2009).

## Conclusions

However much the topic of personal psychology is still being ignored in textbooks of general psychology, more and more attention is being paid, nonetheless, to its essential significance in developing a more holistic approach to the human being as a specific, and in many respects, unique subject of psychological research. Furthermore, psychologists are increasingly aware that if we make the human the subject of psychological research, he would have to be considered in his ecological niche, i.e., in the context of the world he experiences, because he is not only formed by environmental or social and cultural factors, but he can also be an active participant, or even a co-creator. Therefore, we should bear in mind that these particular elements of psychology as a science of the human person, defined more specifically by W. Stern, can be a particular source of inspiration for the development of psychology as a science going beyond the analysis of specific traits, states, their structures and functions, towards psychology as a science of the human person, which can have at his disposition the experience of his habits or personality traits from a perspective of undertaken tasks or chosen objectives. Moreover, he can also be guided by a sense of commitment or responsibility towards himself or others, for their adequate realization.

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#### Abstrakt

Problematyka psychologii osoby prezentowana jest najpierw z perspektywy osiągnięć psychologii humanistycznej (M. Kinget), psychologii proprium (G. Allporta), personalistycznej (J. DuBois) oraz w odniesieniu do założeń E. Deciego i R. Ryana Self-Determination Theory. Niemniej, szczególnym przedmiotem zainteresowania są W. Sterna założenia podejścia personalizmu krytycznego w psychologii i jego sposób interpretacji psychologicznej naturalnych ludzkich dyspozycji osobowych. W nawiązaniu do Sterna koncepcji osoby jako przedmiotu analizy psychologicznej prezentuję model wymiarów struktury dyspozycji osoby ludzkiej jako proaktywnego podmiotu działania. Następnie wskazuję na możliwość formułowania hipotez badawczych i ich empirycznej weryfikacji w zakresie różnic indywidualnych między empirycznie wyodrębnionymi typami charakteru, które określa się za Sternem jako wyznaczniki osobowych orientacji życiowych w wymiarze współdziałanie – zabezpieczanie się.