

## Modalities of Generalization Through Single Case Studies

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**Abstract** The value of case studies for theory building is still doubted in psychology. The paper argues for the importance of case studies and the possibility of generalizing from these for a specific sociocultural understanding of human development. The paper first clarifies the notion of abduction within case studies, drawing on pragmatists James and Peirce and expanding it with the work of Lewin, and argues that it is the core mechanism that allows generalization from case studies. The second section presents the possibility of generalizing from individual single case studies, for which not only the subjective perspective, but also the dynamics by which the social and cultural environment guide and enable the person's development, have to be accounted for. The third section elaborates the question of institutional case studies, where the challenge is to account both for institutional dynamics, and for persons' trajectories within; this is exemplified with an ongoing study on the process of obtaining citizenship in Switzerland. The paper briefly concludes by highlighting two possible implications of the paper, one concerning the process of theoretical reasoning, the other, the fact that sociocultural psychology could itself be seen as an institution in-the-making.

**Keywords** Case study · Abduction · Life trajectories · Institutions · Sociocultural psychology · Law and psychology

A case study is an in-depth study of, as the case may be, a person, a phenomenon or a complex situation to such an extent, that the insights gained allow an understanding of the core dynamics at heart. Case study analysis has been and still is practiced in various sciences, where this practice is the main means to progress knowledge, such as physics, astronomy, history, etc. In psychology, case study has been the approach by which the most significant observations and theorization have been produced, from Freud's long therapeutic processes to prison studies (see also Rolls 2014); it also has been noticed

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that most expertise in a given field is achieved through repeated case study analysis, for instance in medical or social studies (Flyvbjerg 2006). However, within psychology, there is a continued debate about the role of case studies in research practice. Different viewpoints have been expressed, ranging from treating case studies as an explorative genre or illustration, or as a means to develop general ideas and theories. Together, with many others practicing and theorizing case studies (Flyvbjerg 2006; Molenaar 2004; Molenaar and Valsiner 2005), I support the idea that case studies can play a fundamental role in the development of knowledge – when certain conditions are met. Hence, in this paper, I have a double objective: first, I propose a general principle for theory building and its declinations. Second, I consider two types of case studies: those examining people’s lives, and others which have institutions as objects. The latter deserve special attention: institutions are the locus within which societies more specifically and densely aim at guiding human conduct, and it is of foremost importance to understand how people appropriate, resist or simply develop as persons within or through institutions (Zittoun 2016b).

## **Introduction: on Case Studies and Generalization**

Single case studies might be important for theory building in many disciplines, from astrophysics to sociology. The goal for a particular case study will, of course, set the scope or frame the content of the case study. Sociocultural psychology, under its various orientations, aims at understanding the development of people within their changing social and cultural environments, given that these are seen as deeply mutually constitutive: the social and cultural world set the conditions for living, guide the person through concrete arrangements of relations, spaces and material and symbolic things, and also, from within – as the person’s very means to apprehend the world, move and feel have been shaped by that world. However and nevertheless, every person is unique, and has the possibility and freedom to make sense of all the given in a unique way, define in some respect his or her pathway, and act, alone or with others, upon the very conditions of the world given to them. Hence, sociocultural psychology is a *psychology* – a science of human mind, yet is dialogical – it sees the person as always related to others and interacting with them and things in socially and historically located situations. It is dynamic – people, interaction, the social world are mutually dependent and evolving through time (Bruner 1990; Cole 1996; Valsiner 2014b; Valsiner and Rosa 2007; Vygotsky 1987). Furthermore, according to my understanding of sociocultural psychology, the issue of sense making via semiotic dynamics is central – it allows to follow trajectories of meaning from society to the person and back, as well as the issue of the specific positions or perspective held by the person in a world that is organized in such a way that it gives more power to some, than to others (Marková 2003; Valsiner 1998, 2014a; Zittoun and Gillespie 2015a, 2016).

As a semiotic psychology, it finds support in psychoanalysis to get a deeper understanding of dynamics of sense making (Neuman 2013; Salvatore and Zittoun 2011; Zittoun 2015); as social science, it joins some trends of critical psychology or cultural anthropology (Brown and Reavey 2015; Keis et al. 2016; Teo 2014). Finally, as a theoretical enterprise, the perspective proposed here relies on pragmatism as an epistemology – as a way of working towards concepts and knowledge that allows to

see the world in a more thorough if not novel way, and that possibly offers ways to act upon the world (Cornish and Gillespie 2009; James 1904; Peirce 1878).

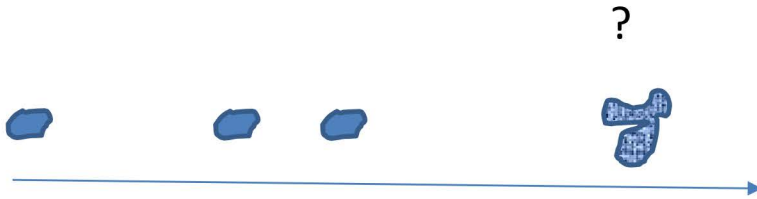
To contribute to the scientific project of sociocultural psychology, case studies need to offer material to understand any, if not all, the dynamics just described: not only the perspective of the person alone, but also her relevant environment regarding a specific issue; her situation as located in time; some dynamics of sense-making; and these, through various perspectives, including, if possible, forms of inner-dialogue. This then demands a certain strategy for theory building. In order to do so, to define a possible way of constructing case studies and a principle of generalization, let us draw upon Charles S. Pierce and William James, the promoters of pragmatism and semiotics in psychology, and Kurt Lewin, whose field psychology inspires the present work (Lewin 1936, 2000e).

James' pragmatism considers as criteria of truth for ideas or concepts their capacity to allow us to see the world differently or more efficiently, or to act upon it. Following these criteria, he proposes a principle for producing concepts, which is actually the core of theory building and generalization:

*ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience, to summarise them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena. Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true instrumentally. (...).*

The process here is always the same. The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. Somebody contradicts them; or in a reflective moment he discovers that they contradict each other; or he hears of facts with which they are incompatible; or desires arise in him which they cease to satisfy. The result is an inward trouble to which his mind till then had been a stranger, and from which he seeks to escape by modifying his previous mass of opinions. (...) New truth is always a go-between, a smoother-over of transitions. It marries old opinion to new fact so as ever to show a minimum of jolt, a maximum of continuity. We hold a theory true just in proportion to its success in solving this 'problem of maxima and minima.' (James 1904)

In the first part of this long quote, James considers ideas as instrumental if they allow us not only to group our diverse experiences, as in a Kantian subsumption, but if they allow us to "ride" through different aspects of our experience and connect them; they are "conceptual short-cuts" that allow us to "link" and "simplify" our experience. A "true" idea is characterized by its efficiency. James then proceeds to describe the process by which such ideas are generated: one meets a "new experience" that contradicts or creates a tension with the background of one's existing knowledge and experience (see Fig. 1); this "inward trouble", or rupture, invites to generate a new theory that allows to hold together both existing ideas with the new evidence or experience (see Fig. 2).



**Fig. 1** Random elements, causing a surprise

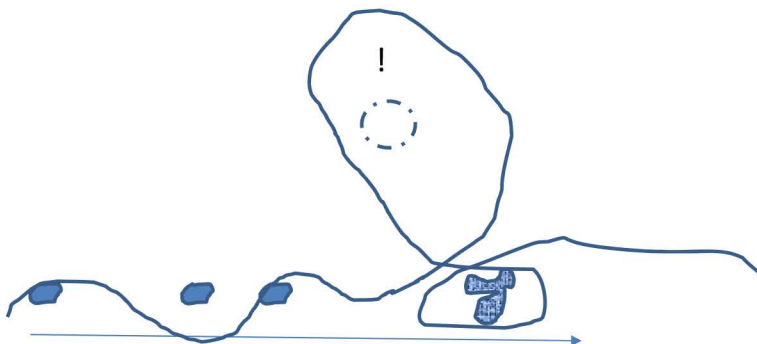
In that sense a new theory is a “smoother-over”; but more concretely, it demands to go back and forth from the diverse experiences to a possible better theory, able to account for this diversity.

This dynamic of searching for a general explanation is the principle described by pragmatists as abduction. For Charles S. Peirce, one of James’ collaborators who dedicated himself to defining this phenomenon, abduction is one of three techniques of guiding reflection so as to produce hypothesis, the two others being induction and deduction. Hence the following proposition was put forward (in what is considered the “late” Peirce (Burks 1946)): “Abduction is the process of forming an explanatory hypothesis. It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea; for induction does nothing but determine a value, and deduction merely evolves the necessary consequences of a pure hypothesis” (Peirce 1905/1994, CP 5.171). Abduction is thus a creative process, with the structure:

The surprising fact, C, is observed;  
 But if A were true, C would be a matter of course,  
 Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.  
 (Peirce 1994, CP 5.189)

As a whole abduction is thus one of the logical ways by which new ideas can be produced. Interestingly, abduction is not acceded by voluntary reasoning; rather, it seems to appear to the thinker as if it were perceived:

The abductive suggestion comes to us like a flash. It is an act of insight, although of extremely fallible insight. It is true that the different elements of the hypothesis



**Fig. 2** Abduction, as creative synthesis accounting for elements including surprising

were in our minds before; but it is the idea of putting together what we had never before dreamed of putting together which flashes the new suggestion before our contemplation. (Peirce 1994, CP 5.181)

Abduction is thus the process by which an idea that could explain a new, or a newly surprising phenomena, or an apparent unrelated collection of elements or events. The abductive suggestion appears as something that, if it were true, may explain this phenomenon or list of events. As “flash” or creative insight, abduction may reasonably be conceived as *creative synthesis* – a new, unique creation based on the recombination of past and present semiotic resources (Valsiner 2015b; Vygotsky 1971, 2004; Zittoun 2004a).

These first considerations on generalization through abduction bring us to the core question of this paper: how to abduct on the basis of a single case? What is to be treated as previous stack of experience on the basis of which this single case may lead to “trouble”, allows “putting together what we had never before”, and thereby bring about the production of a new hypothesis or a new theory?

Before answering, let us consult Kurt Lewin, who was engaged in developing a theoretical psychology in dialogue with data. Lewin characterized his “field psychology” as focusing on dynamics, aiming at identifying psychological process, in a systemic and historical manner (Lewin 2000b, p. 212). He called his epistemology “constructive”, in which lies the principle of generalization from single cases:

If one “abstracts from individual differences”, there is no logical way from these generalities to the individual case (...). The essence of the constructive method is the representation of an individual case with the help of a few “elements” of construction. In psychology, one can use psychological “position”, psychological “forces”, and similar concepts and elements. The general laws of psychology are statements of the empirical relations between these constructive elements or certain properties of them. It is possible to construct an infinite number of constellations in line with those laws; each of these constellations correspond to an individual case at a given time. In this way, the gap between generalities and specificities, between laws and individual differences, can be bridged (Lewin 2000b, pp. 212–213).

Lewin proposes to identify, through single case studies, core elements, that have certain relations between them, and that constitute, in each case, a specific constellation. Hence, through abduction, one works toward the definition and improvement of the working model or theory made out of these key elements, and the theory is tested in each single case – a new configuration of its elements should account for the novel case. Here, as proposed by James, abduction allows circulating between single cases, and between empirical cases and abstraction.

Finally, although Lewin wished to achieve a mathematical formulation for his theories (Lewin 1936; see also Salvatore 2016), he was aware that such degree of formalization and abstraction should not be achieved too rapidly. He thus proposed to elaborate what can be called *mid-range models* - “a network of highways and super-highways, so that any important point may be linked easily with any other” (Lewin 2000c, p. 170) - models that allow circulation between case studies, and between empirical facts and more abstract theories:

The system of concepts capable of bringing together the different fields of psychology in an empirical manner would have to be rich and flexible enough to do justice to the enormous differences between the various events and organisms with which it must deal. It would therefore have to be oriented in two directions, namely, towards theoretical connectedness and toward concreteness. In other words, it would have to be equally suitable for the representation of general laws and of the characteristics of the individual case. (Lewin 1936, p. 5)

Hence, Lewin proposes to elaborate, through abduction, models that allow to distance from the empirical nature of case studies, and to see constellation or configuration that start having an explanatory power, so as to circulate between cases and elaborate more general theories.

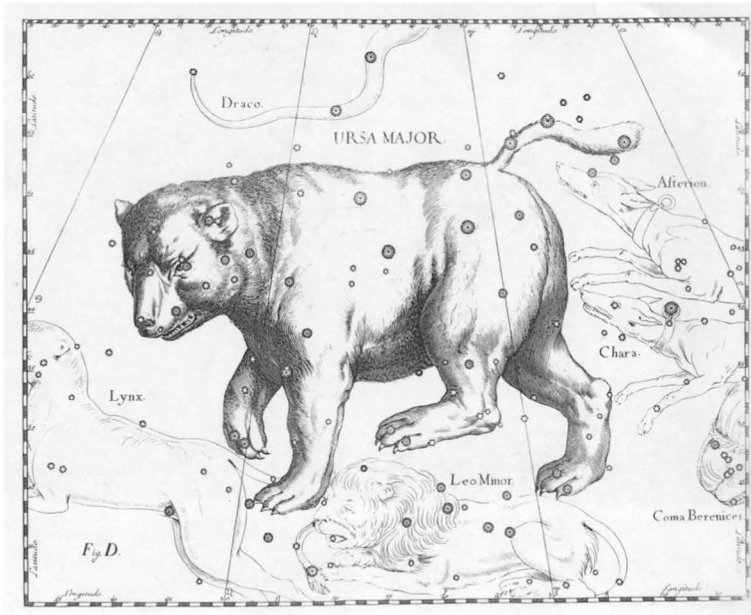
Bringing together Peirce's insight and Lewin's elaborations, we can compare the dynamics of abduction on diverse material to the experience of "seeing" the Big Bear. Here is a portion of the sky with a certain number of stars, some more visible than others (Fig. 3):

Many people might just see random stars in a random picture of the sky; some people might try to "see" a pattern, and, based on their experience, "see" a configuration – a frying pan or a shopping trolley. Others might have been told, or learned, or being exposed to stories or knowledge about astrological constellations, and therefore instantly "see" the Big bear, one of the many star constellations used as orientation systems, and part of a more general theory about the solar system (Fig. 4):

Hence, the same elements can be randomly perceived, or seen as a constellation of elements having potential relations, or a configuration made of elements and their relations that can be further qualified. This example also illustrates to what extent such a configuration, an imaginary creation, is close to perception: a mental act, it is "given" in the perceived reality. Hence, abduction, and hence the building of a mid-range model, is an imaginary process, yet its power is to render discrete elements apparently consistent under some aspect.



**Fig. 3** Picture of the sky from <https://www.google.ch/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjx5YKTxrHOAhWD7xQKHQawA2gQjRwIBw&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.vodeo.tv%2Fdocumentaire%2Fcallisto-la-grande-ourse&bvm=bv.129391328,d.ZGg&psig=AFQjCNFBDAw5NjxYfWo-TkQawJBRJrStiw&ust=1470736383154906>



**Fig. 4** Big Bear, by Johannes Hevelius, 1690. Par Johannes Hevelius - Scanned by: Torsten Bronger 2003 April 4 — Atlas Coelestis. Johannes Hevelius drew the constellation in Uranographia, his celestial catalogue in 1690. - Source: <http://pp3.sourceforge.net/wiki/uma.jpg>, Domaine public, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=89231>

## A Generalization Principle

As a whole, based on the readings of Peirce, James and Lewin, my proposition is that single cases allow for theory building in sociocultural psychology, if they are constructed in such a way that they always offer the background upon which they may provoke trouble, and allow bringing together facts or elements otherwise kept separate. Theory building is thus possible through abduction - a creative synthesis allowing to see “order” or to explain a relationship between diverse elements - from and through single case studies. Abduction allows to see a configuration where there was a constellation; the “insight” is quasi-perceptual, in the sense that it seems to be “in the data”, yet the configuration is imagined.

Consequently, working on a single case, a researcher needs to ensure holding enough elements so as to create, on the ground of his previous experiences, the background for trouble, and the potential for a new configuration to emerge. Still following Peirce, Lewin and James – as well as my research experience - the background is to be found in one’s state of theoretical understanding, one’s experience of living, and previous case studied. But it may also be anything else that questions one’s current model – forces that challenge it, unseen constellations, tensions that have to be accounted for, friendly colleague and students discussion or harsh reviewers.

In this rest of this paper, I distinguish for analytical purposes two types of case studies: cases based on people’s lives; and cases based on institutions in which people’s life take place. Both belong to the project of a sociocultural psychology or a critical psychology (Stenner 2015; Teo 2014; Valsiner 2012; Valsiner and Rosa 2007): the

former emphasizes people's unique perspective within their sociocultural world; the latter primarily documents specific arrangements of the social world, and examines how people may after all define their own trajectories. Of course, this distinction is more a matter of emphasis: cases based on people's lives often imply passing through institutions, and when studying institutions, it is ultimately person's trajectories that deserve attention. Yet emphasizing the one, or the other, has different methodological implications, and often belongs to different bodies of literature. What I propose here as main contribution, is one general principle of generalization for sociocultural case studies, whether the emphasis has been on the person or on the institution.

My core proposition is thus that any case study needs to be built as constellation of different elements, among which people, signs, things and relations to be elaborated into a configuration thanks to abduction, seen as creative insight. The operation of building the case itself is dialogical and perspectival – it convokes different perspectives, such as other case studies of person's in equivalent situations; other moments in time; information about different perspectives on a case; and other theories; and it demands triangulation to gain dimension and depth.

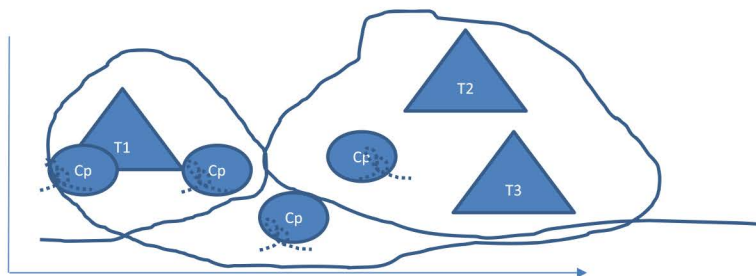
Finally, in honor of Lewin I will attempt a very modest mathematization of these dynamics of generalization within, and through case studies. The core formula here is:

$$G = \Delta(C_n; I; T; N)...$$

Where G is generalization, and  $\Delta$  designates abduction based on set of a  $n$  number of individual cases studies (C) of persons (Cp) and/or institutions (Ci), together with existing theoretical constructs (T) (explanatory hypothesis, midrange models, etc. ), build along these studies or by other researchers, in the same or other disciplines. I now turn to two families of case studies.

## Individual Case Studies

Case studies based on individuals, or rather, single persons, are the most common in psychology. However, let us highlight that the most famous case studies of psychology, that still inspire, among others, cultural psychologists - such as the mnemonist studied by Luria (in Luria and Bruner 1987), Freud's case studies (Freud 2001), the case study of Madeleine by Pierre Janet (Janet 2003) - are not simply the story of a single case. Both Luria and Janet followed one person over years, and Freud followed many. These cases did indeed become building blocks of their theories for two reasons: on the one hand, they were exceptional cases, going against what these authors expected to observe; on the other hand, because the authors could study their evolution over time, and importantly, through their interactions with them , while developing their own theoretical models (Zittoun 2015). In this way, these authors fulfilled the necessary conditions evoked above to build general theories: they had a background upon which to stand, against which ruptures in their expectations could be created – their knowledge about people so far, or their current state of theorization; and the case they were collecting could maintain this dialogue open, by multiplying the cases and/or by multiplying the interactions with the person studied over the years. Such multiplied dialogue allowed abduction. Generalization through the multiplication of case studies can be represented as follows (Fig. 5):



**Fig. 5** Generalization from multiple case studies

Generalization through the multiplication of case studies thanks to abduction can thus be described as the dynamics of finding a pattern or a configuration that holds together cases (Cp), each of them surprising in the light of the previous one, and the elements of theorization (Tn) available to the author. At a finer grain of analysis, this was possible because each case could be seen as a variation of a slowly emerging pattern (represented by dotted lines) – a person whose desires are denied, expressing certain types of symptoms, of which he or she is released after reflection upon their semiotic value. The general theory of repression, for instance, can be seen as abducted through Freud’s series of case studies of so-called hysterics (Breuer and Freud 1995). This can thus been expressed as variation of the formula expressed above, where the general explanatory hypothesis about hysteria can be seen as abduction (see also Zittoun 2015) – a creative synthesis allowed by an imaginary act, allowing to see a configuration uniting case studies (Cn) and theoretical elements (Tn):  $GHysteria = \Delta(Cpn ; Tn)$

However, as sociocultural psychologists, we are not only interested in the subjective history of persons, but also, in the cultural and social conditions that enable or shape them. How to access these? To be clear, one cannot achieve such understanding through three or four reconstructed stories collected via interviews, as we often do when we start doing qualitative research. We need to pursue the effort of classical authors, yet be sure to include some aspects or dimensions that allow us to identify the social or cultural environment, or context, or given, within which lives take place. We thus need to include knowledge or elements about the social and cultural environment, the historical conditions, as well as settings in which events take place – social and cultural guidance – and then only can we complete them as proposed by classical case studies.

### **A Single Case Study: a Young woman’s War**

One example of this strategy is that of our study of the life experience of a young woman during WWII in England.<sup>1</sup> Our basic material was the diary she had written daily and sent to Mass Observation during the war. From the diary, reporting her daily actions, movements and interactions, as well as inner dialogues, emotional experiences, involvement in fiction, etc., we could have an idea of her subjectivity or interiority. However, as we were interested in more general dynamics – how does one adjust to

<sup>1</sup> Alex Gillespie, Flora Cornish, Emma-Louise Aveling and myself, thanks to a grant of the Nuffield foundation.

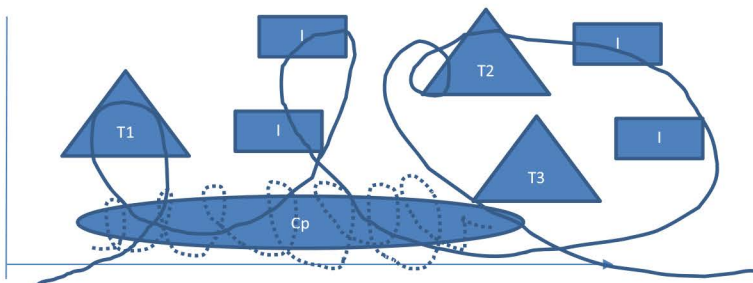
changing social and cultural conditions affecting everyone (war)? How does one find resources to stand social constraints? How does a young girl become an independent woman? – we needed to expand our data. We thus also used the diary of her sister during the same period as counterpoint; we then used existing historical and social literature about the cultural context, saw some exhibitions, found newspapers and films from that time and to which she was exposed, etc. Taking some distance allowed us to see configurations emerging from this disparate data. We used different existing theoretical tools – social representations, symbolic resources, dialogical analysis (Gillespie et al. 2008; Zittoun et al. 2008, 2012). We also worked collaboratively, as a team with different expertise (health and community, position taking, developmental psychology, etc.). This allowed us to formulate hypotheses about the life course of this young woman in a given social and cultural environment, which could then also be exposed to other comparable case studies (e.g., Zittoun 2014). We could show, for example, how this young woman, first guided by her home community and the social settings in which she was brought up, engaged in a process of transformation after she left home, when she joined the home front as landworker. This brought her to a series of conflicting experiences, until - in what can be seen as creative synthesis – she was able to define an independent perspective and imagine a new future for her life and role in a chosen community, comparably to other women at that time.

In terms of generalization, this case study allowed us to develop a model for analyzing people's life trajectories as embodied and symbolic movement through different spheres of experiences across contexts, which imply different psychological dynamics of semiotic elaboration and integration (Gillespie and Zittoun 2015; Zittoun 2016a; Zittoun and Gillespie 2015a, b, 2016).

In this case, the process of generalization thus allowed us to elaborate our integrative model, a mid-range model based on the identification of different spheres of experiences of the person and their evolution through time, as well as the dynamics within and between them. This allowed us to identify variations of a configuration – a pattern – uniting the person and her environment and evolving a different moment in time (represented by the dotted line in Fig. 6) (Zittoun and Gillespie 2015a).

On a more general plane, abduction was thus possible through our knowledge of the case, various information (In) about the social and political conditions, and the use of various theoretical elements (T) (to which we could add the different perspectives of the researchers), as in Fig. 6). This can thus be summarized as

$$GInt = (Cp; In; Tn)$$



**Fig. 6** Generalization from a situated individual case study

Again, here, the creative synthesis results in a general model, through a movement of abduction – seeing order where there was not, allowing seeing the reality as patterned rather than a random collection. The general theory accounts for the case, but is powerful enough to live independently of the case and to be accountable for other cases. It for instance can become one part of complex, institutional case studies.

## **Institutional Case Studies**

In this section, I turn to the specificities of institutional case studies. Although institutions of different types have been studied by social sciences including social and organizational psychology, the difficulty here is to develop a perspective allowing a sociocultural psychological analysis, that is, to study institutions and people within it, with a specific care for the perspective of the person. Here, I explore a selection of theorizations of institutions, the methodologies proposed accordingly, before highlighting choices consistent with the perspective outlined so far. Then I develop one current example of research, before indicating the path to theoretical generalization.

What is an institution? To find a solid definition, we can turn to sociology given the scarcity of the term in psychology (see Zittoun 2016a, b). Sociology has indeed defined itself as the study of institutions, understood as “any system of beliefs, or collective modes of actions” (after Durkheim 2002, p. 15, my translation). More recent definitions include a large variety of social organizations, made out of typical interactions and systems of implicit and explicit rules, ranging from marriage to the UN (Henning 2007). I will limit here my reflection on the case of institutions that are understood as bounded or self-contained organizations, such as a school, a specific administrative procedure, or a health care offer, excluding general and diffuse social institutions such as “marriage”. As sociocultural psychologists, we can therefore ask: What is an institution made of, and what are the interactions taking place therein, so that it may guide the person? And do people lose any self-determination once they enter an institution? More generally, how to describe both the institution as such, and people’s experience of these?

Let us draw on Kurt Lewin here as well. As part of his field theory, he conceptualized the constellation of forces that constitute the lifeworld of the person. The lifeworld is conceived as what is meaningful for the person in a certain moment in time and space, and the “real” causes of certain forces are always beyond the apprehension of the person. However, “certain parts of the physical or social world do affect the state of the life space at that time” (Lewin 2000a, p. 210) and thus constitute the “boundary zone” of the life space of that person. These aspects differ from the “multitude of processes in the physical or social world which do not affect the life space of the individual at that time” (Lewin 2000a, p. 210). Lewin poses that it is important to determine these elements of the boundary zone, and admits that it may be important to document these elements outside of the life space using approaches from sociology or other disciplines. However, these should be described first, according to the unit of analysis that allows to grasp the constellation of forces significant to the situation, and second, as these may become psychological phenomena (Lewin 2000a, 2000c). Lewin himself analyzes the life of people as guided by institutions, such as education or food habits. In the latter case, he proposes a dynamic analysis that aim at

understanding how food reaches the table. He thus identifies “social channels” and their “gatekeepers”, that is, people who control them with their cognitive structure, motivation and conflicts (Lewin 2000d).

Another paradigmatic approach to institutions is that of Erwin Goffman; especially in his work on total institutions, he showed the settings these constitute, the social frames they offer, and their work on people (Goffman 1961, 1974). More recently, Susie Scott complemented this work, and notably proposed to see the *reinventive* function of institutions such as boarding schools, religious congregations, or therapeutic communities (Scott 2011). She shows that institutions have their own logic and organization, and that they operate through time. As such, they guide the lives of people –who however are “agents” who mostly choose to enter or participate in these institutions, and have a margin of freedom. Finally, Valsiner has proposed to consider institutions from a cultural psychology, semiotic perspective, as “functional architectonics of signs assemblies that are used to regulate the organizational process” (Valsiner 2015a, p. 124) – that is, layered signs systems, build through time and generations, which have a configuration and guidance power over social organization.

Hence, when studying institutions in the limited sense selected here, we can retain both the need to account for the structure, material, temporal, social and symbolic organization of an institution, but also their dynamic, or the fact that “their task is (...): how to organize the set of ongoing processes so that they can lead to the desired or best outcomes” (Valsiner 2015a, p. 205). In the terms of the authors seen here, institutions first *channel* people’s conduct (or project, or knowledge, etc.), and second, are *transformative* of people (reinventive), and especially through the interactions with gatekeepers and their semiotic nature. However, people have their own intentionality, they can internalize, appropriate or resist this channeling or guiding function.

Methodological strategies to study institutions have ranged from questionnaire and survey, quasi-experimental or action-research strategies, interviews with key-actors or focus groups, observations, or even participant observation (Engeström 2005; Lewin 2000e; Smith 2006). However, whatever the data collection strategy, in the logic proposed here, these need to give us ground to reflect on the mutual work of institution on people, and people on institution. In effect, institutions create only the settings for people’s action and meaning making; they are given to many people, yet people do not experience institutions similarly. Theoretically, a distinction needs to be kept between the socially given, and what is psychologically experienced - as well as their mutual relations (Jodelet 1989; Lewin 1936, 2000e; Schuetz 1944, 1951; Zittoun 2004b, 2006). Practically, we thus need to document the given – the institutional conditions and of people making or representing it; what people do with it, that is, actual interactions, transactions or encounters between the person and aspects of the institution; and how people live their lives, and experience the institution when entering in, moving through or getting out it (see similarly on space Lefebvre 1974).

### **An Institutional Case Study: the Administrative Procedure Delivering Swiss Citizenship**

To exemplify the question of building a case study of an institution, I present here a case of an institutional procedure – a procedure that goes through different administrative and official offices. The procedure is that by which the Swiss state attributes, or not, Swiss

citizenship to foreign citizens who make the demand. In an interdisciplinary research on “integration” gathering law scholar and social scientists,<sup>2</sup> we combined an analysis of the legal and administrative criteria, and procedures of evaluating what does it mean being a “Swiss citizen”, with an analysis of the person’s trajectory of becoming Swiss.

We used different types of data: legal and juridical material, to retrace the historical evolution of the meanings of “integration” – by analyzing two *corpus iuris*: the Law on foreigners (LEtr) and the Citizenship Act (LN) (Di Donato 2016). Then we interviewed a dozen of persons who had either applied for a Swiss citizenship, or for an extension of their residency permit. More specifically, we built five complete cases, combining interviews with the person, their personal administrative files – their letters exchanged with the administrations, etc. – and the files the administration had built on their cases. Finally, we interviewed administrative officers in charge of the request of citizenship, who have to apply the law, verify that people’s application fulfill the legislative criteria and create their files (forms, letters, internal correspondences, etc.). As a whole, we could progressively sketch the “official procedure” by which people’s files should proceed, how these were actually handled through various offices, and finally, to some extent, how people were experiencing these procedures. Here, I focus on one of the cases, that of Charles, which allows me to highlight the work of the administration.

First, at the level of legal discourse, we can see how the legislative representations and terminology has changed over the last century: in the 1920s the Swiss authorities expressed their wish to “transform” foreign persons into Swiss citizens, or to “metamorphose” them ((quoted by Di Donato 2016, pp. 30–32). Over the last twenty years the discourse changed and currently the law fixes the conditions for obtaining the Swiss nationality in terms of time of residency (12 years in the country, Article 15), as well as their “aptitude” (in the French version) or “suitability” (in the official English translation). Hence suitability is the heading of Article 14:

Before the licence is granted, the applicant’s suitability for naturalisation must be verified, and in particular whether he or she (a) is integrated into Swiss society; (b) is familiar with Swiss habits, customs and practices; (c) abides by Swiss law (d) does not pose a risk to Swiss internal or external security.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of procedure, since the 50s, given the Confederate constitution of Switzerland, it was established that a demand for Swiss citizenship is made at the local level (the “commune”), which will be treated by the Canton – it is a demand for the right to be made *bourgeois* of the place; this request is also sent at the Federal level, where the authorities need to deliver a prior authorization (in French, “autorisation préalable”) to start the procedure of “naturalization” itself – of becoming Swiss (Di Donato 2016, chapter 1). The State delegates to the Canton, and the commune has the duty to enquire

<sup>2</sup> A project led by Pascal Mahon and myself, with Flora Di Donato and the collaboration of Anne Lavanchy and Elodie Garros, supported by the Swiss National Fund: “Immigrant’s trajectories of *integration*, between undetermined (legislative) criteria and uncertain *lifecourses*. Legal case studies” (FNS CR1111–147,287).

<sup>3</sup> Official English translation with no legal force, available on the website of the Swiss administration: CC 141.0 Federal Act of 29 September 1952 on the Acquisition and Loss of Swiss Citizenship (Federal Act on Citizenship [SCA]). (2013). Retrieved 22 August 2016, from <https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19520208/index.html>

about the “suitability” or “aptitude” of the candidate to become a citizen. This procedure is still the case today. In some communes, the “aptitude” is evaluated by the police, in others, by a special commission for integration. Decisions are then taken locally, at the communal level – by the migration office and some delegates, then at the assembly, then these must be approved at the Canton, and at the State level. Then only does the real process of attributing the citizenship start, with a similar logic. Hence, the “institution” here designates the series of offices which, jointly, produce an administrative act. Materially, it includes various state buildings, with offices, filing cabinets, files, meeting rooms, and systems of circulation of files (postal system, internal delivery, internet, etc.). The files themselves are a compilation of hand-filled forms, official letters and documents, home-typed letters, all this with hand-written additions, internal post-its, etc. (Di Donato 2014a) As we will see, the function of gatekeeper is not clearly assigned to a specific agent, yet very present.

In what follows, I illustrate the work of the institution through the case trajectory of Charles, a candidate to Swiss nationality.<sup>4</sup> From an interview and a biographical essay, we learned that Charles and his family left a country where they were persecuted for political reasons. Aged 15, he crossed the continent with his mother and was 3 months in transit, until he was accepted in Switzerland as refugee to be reunited with his father, already there. Once in Switzerland, he followed French classes, learnt a trade in the mechanic sector, and got married. After having lived in Switzerland long enough, he had the right to apply for citizenship. It is thus interesting to see how he justified his demand in the application; he thus wrote under “motivation”:

I arrived in Switzerland aged 17 with my parents. I learned French and a trade, and I work since I am 20. I feel well integrated in the Canton and I consider Switzerland as my country. I was married here, and I would like to live here for ever as full citizen, sharing the fate of this country that welcomed me. (Charles’ application, 2003)

Charles seems to assume that the duration of his stay fulfils the first condition for applying, and he “feels” integrated, proofs being his marriage and work. Interestingly, he also formulates an imagined, or wished future: given his past and his present situation, he expresses the wish to become a “full citizen” so as to fully contribute to the country and share its “fate” as member of a whole. This externalization is of course addressed to a specific audience (the administration) with a certain goal. However, this taken-for-granted integration, or expressed legitimacy of the demand, is worth noting for two reasons. First, we observed similar formulations in other cases we studied. Second, it will be particularly interesting to contrast it with later formulation by Charles, as we will see.

The application goes its way (from the commune to the Canton to the state, and back), and before delivering the prior authorization, the commune delegates to the

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<sup>4</sup> I develop here a case analyzed interdisciplinarily by Pascal Mahon, Flora Di Donato, Anne Lavanchy and myself, that was presented orally and that benefited from the feedback of our colleagues from the national research project “on the move” (Di Donato et al. 2015). All the quotes from the original French translated by me.

police the duty to evaluate the “aptitude” of the candidate. The police report in Charles’ files, written 18 months after the original demand, contains a list of his past trainings and employments. There has been a series of different employments, with once a 3 months gap between employments. The following commentary was issued by the police:

**Integration:**

Language: speaks French quite well

Hobbies: Plays football in FC XY and other sports

Note: Talking to these employers, the professional life of the applicant appears not stabilised. In effect, it has been regularly cut by unemployment periods (Police report, 2005)

Here we see the first action by which the law becomes implemented, as a particular police office has to define a procedure (e.g., talk to former employers) and identify facts (e.g., leisure) to be considered as signs – indexes – of a successful, or failed integration. This report is read at the commune level, where a report is written with a first recommendation after the council meeting: “Our council recommends a negative prior notice. Professional instability and doubt regarding his integration are grounds for our position.” (Commune report). This is sent to the Canton, which writes to the State its recommendation: “Prior authorisation: NEGATIVE – we have doubts about the integration of that person” (Letter of Canton to State). Finally the Department in charge at the State level writes back to Charles the following: “We have to tell you that the Cantonal authorities proposed a negative prior notice. In particular, they doubt about your integration in this Country. ...Naturalization seems hypothetical” (Letter of State to Charles).

It is here noteworthy to see the work of the institution, notably at the level of the wording: from the first police officer notes “professional life of the applicant appears not stabilised”, the communal clerk in charge of the letter writes “professional instability and doubts regarding his integration”. Although the facts, such as being member of a local football association and speaking the language, correspond to what is (legally and juridically) expected as integration, the “apparent” lack of professional stability, becomes “instability” and a suspected “lack of integration”. No fact that would support such initially common-sense evaluation is apparent in the file. Furthermore, this becomes a “doubt” about integration which justifies a prior negative assessment. The assessment is simply handed down the institutional chain. Hence, the institution appears as a long series of agents, whose positions are given by their professional assignments in various offices; files circulate serially between them, one taking on what the previous said and adding on. Civil servants work alone; they have to work in what appears to them a fair manner, yet also follow some instructions they receive from their superiors. There are only two forums for collective decision making: one is the office meeting at the Canton’s level, and the other is the communal council’s vote. In either case, the meetings are prepared by clerks, who are in charge of the files, and of putting forward the information they consider as relevant for the decision. However, they formally do not carry the responsibility for the final decision; yet it is these social agents who apply the Law, following explicit but also many implicit principles. As a result of this procedure, a decision emerges – and so the gatekeeping function seems distributed all along; the gate has been kept by many hands, yet nobody in particular carries the weight of the decisive move.

In this case, Charles does not remain passive, and writes back in the legal time to object, addressing the office from which he received the decision:

I read your letter with great surprise... (...) I consider the unfavourable reply to my application for naturalization by the cantonal authorities exceedingly unfair. I think, in fact, that it is unfair to characterize questionable professional integration of a person because he found himself unemployed beyond his control and for a short period due to changing economic conditions. I sincerely believe that the cantonal and communal authorities, who have given us examples of great openness toward their fellow citizens, will review the application in question (Charles, letter to State Office, 2006).

He also adds to the letter proofs of his current long-term contracts and of his financial healthy situation and explains his social and cultural activities. He hereby demonstrates what Di Donato calls his “legal agency” – his position toward the legal authorities- (Di Donato 2014b) – displaying his competence as lay person facing the legal system and mobilizes the means at disposal to discuss what he believes is an unfair judgement (the law is supposed to act in fairness and transparency). He even invokes the examples of openness of the authorities, which suggests either a good knowledge of the law and local cases (besides his own acceptance as refugee as child), or his good use of adequate resources. In effect, before writing the letter he consulted the local service for integration, which helped him to formulate the legitimate claim that his job is actually highly dependent on the economic situation (as is the whole watch making industry in Switzerland especially at the level of low-qualified jobs).

The office receiving the letter seems sensitive to Charles’ letter, and so the State commissions the canton and then the commune to reevaluate the case in 2006. The Canton also requests letters of support from people who personally know Charles. An employee of the fitness in which he trains thus writes that since he registered to the club five years earlier, he appeared as “agreeable towards everyone and he integrated very quickly. He is a correct young man, very polite and slightly shy. He always respected his duties in what regards payment of registration fees”. Only two years later, a police report is requested. A second police officer is now in charge of the evaluation of Charles’ integration:

M. Charles has expanded his professional activities (...) He is known by our services. He has some unpaid tax bills... (...) Conclusion: We perceive M. Charles as a well-balanced person, and well established on the Neuchâtel soil. Although he has opened the Xth pizzeria/kebab, he displays pretensions regarding his professional future” (police report, 13.8.08)

During the three years since the first application, Charles has indeed opened a restaurant. Also, in 2008 – still waiting for a reply – he was involved in a traffic incident in which he must have acted in a way that did not please a police officer, as we know from some notes in the administrative file. This second report can again be seen as an attempt to produce an “objective” report yet imbued of the subjective evaluation by the policeman. Hence, evaluating a person as “well-balanced” is a quasi-psychological evaluation not corresponding to any legal

expectation. Also, what does mean “although he has opened the xth pizzeria... he displays pretensions regarding his professional future”? Does the policeman admire Charles’ good will in terms of participation to the local economy, which would be a sign of integration, or is he paternally dismissing that attempt – suggesting there are too many, which would show Charles’ unrealistic evaluation of the situation? Anyway, the report also mentions Charles “being known to the services” – which in legal terms, suggests a lack of respect of democratic rules of living together – yet the report does not mention any other indication. Finally, there are “unpaid tax bills”. Although this is nowhere an explicit condition to Swiss citizenship - many citizens do not always pay regularly their taxes - this is considered as worth mentioning.

And indeed, these two points are seen as decisive by the commune council, which gives a second negative prior judgement: “Our council formulates a negative prior notice. The fact that some taxes were unpaid, some pending pursuits and the fact that he was known by the police justify our position” (Commune report, 2008). And from there on, decisions follow and Charles receives a second negative prior notice in 2008. Charles then hires a lawyer who writes a few letters and explains the situation to Charles (underlying the role of the unpaid taxes) – another display of legal agency. Yet the lawyer asks for high fees and obtains very little result, and Charles put an end to that contract in 2009.

Charles life however moves on; in 2010, he becomes a political representative for his town (non-Swiss can be elected); he divorces and remarries one year later. He also obtains a letter from the financial services attesting that he now paid all his due taxes. At this point, Charles writes a letter to the commune, asking for a reconsideration of his case, arguing:

I remarried... I have still a full time job... I own a Pizzeria, which is providing new jobs. My financial situation is totally healthy. (...) It is a matter of honour for me to be integrated as much as possible in the social and professional life of the region. (...) I have been elected as political representative of the communal level. (...) I make it a matter of honour to respect the traffic rules... (Charles, Letter to the State, 2012)

The State replies briefly that the case has been closed in the meantime, and invites Charles to start the whole procedure again if he is still interested. Hence, the institution needed ten years to give a final negative closure to a prior evaluation of the possibility of demanding the Swiss nationality. The actual procedure never started.

We can now synthesize the work of the institution, how Charles dealt with it, and how this impinged on his more personal life. First, at the institutional level, the administration followed its logic and its temporality – creating gaps of two or three years between a demand and a reply – due to meeting schedules, work overload, bank holidays, etc. Decisions are made on the basis of common sense observations, which are used as signs of compliance to certain half-undefined criteria of integration. This allows the institution to intervene in Charles life, and to evaluate various aspects of his acts and free choices. On the other hand, this institution has no face, and has a very selective memory – two letters of refusal seem to have no memory of each other – yet a notice in a traffic incident remain a long-term trace.

Second, in his interaction with the institution, Charles is active. On the one hand, he displays “legal agency”: he finds the support of the adequate services, consults a lawyer (although not a very efficient one), and he argues for his case when he judges decisions unfair. On the other hand, he also has changed some aspects of his life – such as work towards the clearing of his financial situation; he also choses to highlight some aspects over others.

Third, on a more subjective side, this almost ten years procedure also meant something to Charles. In his life, the legal procedure is one aspect yet all his other spheres of experiences continue. In terms of lifecourse temporality, ten years allow for many changes; and so, in the meantime, Charles has divorced and remarried, he became a local entrepreneur participating to the local economy, he is training young people in various sports, and he became a regional political figure. Yet the sphere of experiences related to the legal procedure – the work of the institution – probably also entered in dialogue with all these spheres.

We can look more closely at his externalizations to the institution to see traces of a change of position and emotional tone. Hence, if we compare Charles’ first statement about his reasons to apply, to his last letter, we can see a dramatic change of tone. From “feeling integrated” and wanting to “shar[e] the fate of this country that welcomed me”, this positive imagination of self with others in the future, simply demanding the recognition of a matter of fact, Charles turned to a different tone. When he writes “It is a matter of honour for me to be integrated as much as possible in the social and professional life of the region. (...) I make it a matter of honour to respect the traffic rules”... (Charles Letter to the State, 2012), Charles now adopts a tone of “honour” and obedience. He now submits himself to a Law, and makes a matter of honour to obtain recognition of his obedience and proof his aptitude and attempts to be integrated. It is as if in the second letter, the integration having been so much questioned on unpredictable criteria, that he himself must constantly prove that he deserves the right to be recognised as such. Hence, his imagination of self - as sharing the fate of a community - has been radically invalidated. During the interview with us, Charles actually comments that the procedure “does not integrate... But it disintegrates”. As a whole, Charles seems to experience a paradoxical situation himself: on the one side, he displays what appears to us – as sympathetic observers, who know only part of the story – as very “apt” citizen, very much “integrated” in the local communities and on the other side. In contrast, the general emotional tone that seems to run through the spheres is that of feeling not recognized and, precisely, the denial of integration.

As synthesis, we may thus observe that, the institution has played its gatekeeping role – not only by blocking his demand, but also by delaying replies, adding requests - and produced over ten years a negative prior evaluation of Charles’ aptitude of being Swiss, disqualifying a claim to be part of a community. On a subjective level, Charles has changed from a discourse from taken-for granted part of a community, to a discourse of submission and obedience. Hence, may be the institutional machinery actually achieved an unspoken goal: that of actually transforming Charles into a good citizen (who pays his bills on time and obeys the rules) – which would be a paradoxical integration.

In terms of generalization, we can now proceed in two steps. The first one is regarding this specific research project, within which the in-depth analysis of the five cases we built will allow us to produce generalizations regarding the work of this

particular institution. Among other issues, we hope to highlight the decisive dynamics by which the institution assesses people's aptitude to obtain citizenship, and by which it transforms people that enter in contact with it, as well as people's agency and capacity to maintain an open imagination (Mahon et al., in preparation). The direction of generalization could be related to the paradoxical integration required by what appears not as a procedure to recognize a person's "aptitude" to request the Swiss nationality, but a machinery to transform the person in an "apt" person (Di Donato 2016), a variation of the idea that institutions are "transformative" (Scott 2011; Valsiner 2015a).

On a more general level, this research project proposes a mid-range theoretical and analytical frame for building complex institutional case studies. This more general proposition consists in distinguishing three perspectives – the channeling work of the institution; the actual exchanges and interactions between the person and the representative of the institution; and the person's life course with its sphere of experiences. These allow indeed to highlight the incommensurable yet mutually defining temporalities, the divergent goal orientations, and perhaps, the clashes of (or lack of) meanings and sense. As a whole, we thus produce a sociocultural psychology: people being closely guided by one societal construction, yet remaining persons, with their agency, subjectivity and imagination.

If we want now to schematize the process of generalization through an institutional case study, it could take the following shape:

In Fig. 7, the large 3D rectangle represents the institution, with the small cubes (InP) represents information about specific aspects of the institution as a whole or a specific encounter (e.g., an office and the letters it produces, a specific piece of documentation, a specific moment of meeting), and through there, trajectories of persons (Cp). In that case, generalization is produced through the necessary dialogical movement the researcher(s) produce when constructing such cases, and especially the contradictions, inconsistencies or any other surprises it proposes and demand a reconsideration of the whole.

Hence, institutional case studies allow to create units of analysis in which society is revealed locally, and its guiding forces comes to the fore; yet by highlighting people's trajectories and experiences within, we keep developing a sociocultural psychological understanding. Here, the generalization formula can be understood as such:

$$\text{Ginst} = \Delta(\text{Ci}; \text{CInp}; \text{Cp} + \text{I})$$

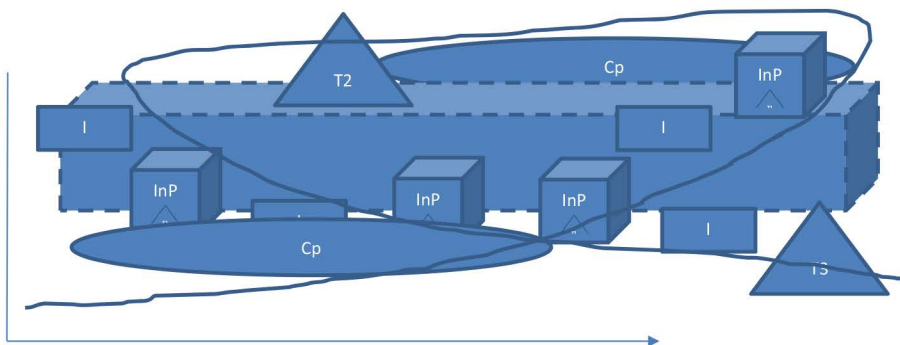


Fig. 7 Institutional case study

Generalization through an institutional case study (Ginst) is possible through abduction, as imaginary exploration and creative synthesis produced by a dialogue between the case of one institution (Ci) and its many instantiations (Cinp) (its materiality and spatiality, its social, symbolic and temporal organization), cases of persons, as well as information about the history and the context (I), as well as theorization (itself informed by previous institutional case studies).

## **Back to Generalization from Single Case Studies**

In this paper, I have tried to highlight the specificity of case studies for sociocultural psychology and other approaches interested in the mutual constitution of people and society. I proposed two complementary ways to do so: we can approach these dynamics either by focusing on people's trajectory, and then including in our analysis the social and cultural environment that count in their specific situation, or by focusing on a specific social or cultural situation, and see how people develop their trajectories within. In such reading, individual case studies on the one hand, institutional case studies on the other, simply become two complementary ways to closely look at people's experience in society.

On this basis, I have also tried to highlight a general principle for generalization from single case studies, which can be summarized as such: delineate a human/sociocultural experience; closely observe the experience, on the background of previous experiences which allow for surprise, and that can include: other observed cases of people or institutions, studied by oneself or others (Cn); different sources of information (I); other researchers' perspective, present and past; other disciplines' perspective, present and past (N). The process of dialoging between these elements, and between these elements and theory – that is, a system of core elements, in configurations that can vary, variations which should account for these case studies – is the condition for abduction. In addition, generalization demands the production of a new idea – a hypothetical explanation – that can only be generated by an act of detachment of the data, a creative insight, and imaginary move that allows seeing configurations where there was just an amount of information. This is what I have tried to condense in the formula:

$$G = \Delta(Cn; I; N)$$

The search for such configurations can be done in many possible ways, and can include operations such as comparisons, identification of similarities and differences between the facts and dynamics constituting the case, but also intuition, attention to the unexpected and surprising, trial and errors in searching for threads across elements and spheres of experience, and move up and down from abstraction to concrete and back; it also demands going back and forth between the case and the theoretical configuration at hand: can a variation account for these facts and dynamics? If yes, how? All these dynamics are dialogical, whether they take place within the researcher whose experience is expanded by texts, narrations, and various materials, or through dialogue with others – researchers, persons from the field, or any person willing to discuss on such topic. The richer case studies are, the more this dialogue can be nourished and deepened, and generalization can grow.

Above all, generalization through single cases demands theoretical imagination. This has two final implications. First, it may allow developing a more generalized understanding of thinking in different domains. As we have shown, imagination is a core dynamic of human and cultural development (Zittoun and Gillespie 2016). The present paper reminds us that theory building demands imagination as well – as an important move within the production of new ideas. In that sense, abduction is not only a specific form of logical reasoning, opposed to free imagination; rather, like any synthetic and creative act, it necessarily demands researchers' imagination.

The second general implication concerns sociocultural psychology itself. As any growing domain or scientific field, it can be seen as an institution-in-the-making – with its centers, authorities, conferences and journals, therefore gatekeepers. It is also in danger of repeating ideas rather than producing new insights or more general knowledge (Valsiner 2014b). The institutional case study presented in these pages might therefore invite us to reflect on our own practices: how often do we, as researchers and scholars, display theoretical imagination? Or do we in fact simply transform our new or younger colleagues into some “apt” scholars, eventually coming to the paradoxical result that researchers become transmitters rather than explorers? Hence, a final implication from this reflection on generalization is a call for more researchers to develop case studies and new theories, so as to imagine ways beyond our well-known horizons.

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### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study and all data was made anonymous.

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