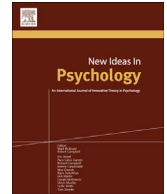




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A unified psychology of the person?



Jack Martin*

Simon Fraser University, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Although there is much that I admire and endorse in Eric Johnson's plea for a more inclusive psychology of the whole human being or person, I think his articulation of his "pluriform" of personhood is insufficiently critical and requires much greater attention to the possibility of incommensurabilities across the various forms he attempts to integrate or, more modestly, include. After I elaborate and illustrate these concerns, I describe the kind of engaged and critical pluralism I think a progressive psychology of personhood will require, and consider two ways in which I believe scientific psychology currently is ill-prepared for such critical engagement.

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The fact that much of what I say herein is critical of Eric Johnson's important plea for a more comprehensive theorizing of "the whole human being" should not be taken to indicate a lack of sympathy with his project. What Johnson attempts in his feature article in this special issue demands our most careful attention, and therefore deserves our full critical consideration. Indeed, I can think of no topic more central to the discipline of psychology.

In an earlier contribution to this journal (Martin, 2010), I advanced a proposal to make "the person acting in the world" the primary concern of psychological theory and inquiry. In that article, I suggested such a focus might be an appropriate basis for an "interactive engagement across the diverse sub-fields, interests, and other groupings that currently capture the identities of most psychologists." However, I also made

... it very clear that what I am proposing is not a grand unification, let alone a dominant meta-perspective, but a sufficiently general vision of the focal object of psychological inquiry – the person acting in the world – to encourage the development of a plurality of perspectives aimed, at least in part, at a common 'object' ... [W]

hat I would encourage is the kind of critical engagement with one's own and others' perspectives that attends more modest and attainable efforts to 'cross at least a couple of borders' within the contemporary psychological frontier. (p. 225)

In the opening sentence to his essay, "Mapping the Field of the Whole Person: Towards a Form Psychology," Eric Johnson states that "a science of individual human beings has among its responsibilities the description of 'the whole human,'" which I interpret as equivalent to my "person acting in the world." Johnson's suggested means of advancing such a description is through a "form psychology" dedicated to seeking "a thorough description of the existent object ... the one whole human, understood as comprehensively as possible – the referent of the forms, the 'pluriform,' if you will." To this end, Johnson embraces "a perspectival realism" that (1) "maintains that there can be sufficient evidence to demonstrate that more than one model fits the relevant data, and leads to the valid conclusion that each perspective contributes to a fuller, more accurate understanding" and (2) thereby overcomes the possibility that different forms of construing the "whole human being" might be "mutually exclusive." However, nowhere in his article does he critically consider the actual validity of any of the approaches he discusses, nor does he specify exactly how any potential incommensurabilities

* Department of Psychology, Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, Canada V5A 1S6.

E-mail address: Jack.Martin@sfu.ca.

among them are to be obviated. Toward the end of his essay, Johnson states that “Distinguishing the forms as sharply as has been done in this article creates conceptual barriers between the forms that will have to be overcome in conceptual integration.” He goes on to say, “Furthermore, it could be argued that the door is opened too wide and that any notion of the whole human could be allowed in.” To each of these possibilities he says only that it “is too large to address in what is already an overlong article.”

Although I resonate to the broad idea of an integrated science of the whole human being and think there is considerable merit in much of what Johnson says in his article, I believe he greatly underestimates the extent and nature of *potential invalidities within* and *possibly incommensurable differences across* the various forms he aspires to integrate. Indeed, rather than “distinguishing the forms ... sharply,” I think Johnson’s presentation of them is both insufficiently distinctive and insufficiently critical. When Johnson states that it is possible “to obtain a more general and abstract concept within which to fit all the valid distinctive properties of the whole human,” he assumes validity too quickly. In doing so, he fails to recognize salient conceptual, logical, metaphysical, and methodological difficulties and differences that might disqualify any one of his forms or some of the perspectives subsumed within it, and which might make impossible any shared sense of “valid” that could apply to all of them.

To elaborate and illustrate my concern that Johnson’s essay is insufficiently critical, I begin by focusing on a long-standing, well-documented criticism of mainstream personality psychology. To elaborate and illustrate my second concern about Johnson’s failure to recognize the extent of possibly incommensurable differences, I contrast individualistic, constructivistic and relational, constitutional approaches to what Johnson calls the “self as subject or personal agent.” In closing, I sketch the kind of critical engagement across different perspectives I think will be required to work through such concerns. I also consider the extent to which psychology and psychologists currently are prepared to participate in a critical and pluralistic community of scholars seeking to understand persons and forge a progressive psychology of the person.

1. Personality psychology versus a psychology of individuals: an example of the need for greater critical attention concerning the validity of approaches included

I think the need for a more critical consideration of approaches to be included in Johnson’s attempt to frame the whole person is well illustrated by the failure of many personality psychologists to consider carefully a long-standing logical and methodological critique of the core idea that empirical information concerning differences between groups of individuals produces knowledge that can advance a science of individual persons. The obvious difficulty with such an assertion is apparent when one considers a basic difference between statistical truth and general truth. General truth of the kind enshrined in well-known scientific laws, such as Bernoulli’s law of fluid dynamics or Fourier’s law of heat conduction, holds true in that it applies to each and every

relevant instance governed by these laws and their conditions of application. For example, Fourier’s law applies to all instances of the transmission of heat in materials. In all such instances, the heat flux is proportional to the gradient of the temperature difference. Statistical truth, on the other hand, does not hold true across all relevant instances. To speak statistically is to speak about what is true on average, and something that holds true on average is not true of all of the instances that contribute to the average. Thus, although extroversion may be statistically correlated strongly and positively with success as a public speaker (assuming logically and methodologically independent measures of both extroversion and success at public speaking), there will be some successful public speakers who are not extroverts. The significance of this point is clear in that it is not possible to determine based on the statistical correlation whether or not any particular extrovert who speaks publicly is successful. Thus, it is not possible to move from knowledge of a statistical truth (such as those truths established through empirical research in personality psychology, even if they were to prove enduring across time and circumstances) to knowledge of any individual person. This basic critical insight was advanced by Kurt Lewin (1935) and Egon Brunswik (1943) in the early days of personality psychology and has been repeated and elaborated by several quantitative, historical, and theoretical psychologists since then (e.g., Danziger, 1990; Lamiell, 2003).

The most frequently made, but entirely inadequate, defense of the common practice amongst personality psychologists of using correlational research on groups as directly relevant to the assessment and/or interpretation of individuals and their conduct is that such applications are necessarily probabilistic. Given the complexities of human experience and action across time and context, it would be absurd to demand instance-specific or individual-specific certainty of the sort possible in some branches of natural science. The problem with such a defense is that the data on which the probabilities are based, at least in the vast majority of research in personality psychology, are aggregate data of groups of individuals rather than data drawn from the life histories of any particular individuals. Conclusions and predictions based on either sets of data are probabilistic, but these probabilities are not conceptually equivalent. As a simple illustration of the difference, imagine that you have been asked to estimate the probability that a particular baseball player will hit well over the course of a season. Would you use data concerning the batting averages of groups of baseball players and perform a calculation based on matching the physical and psychological characteristics of the individual whose batting performance you wish to predict against this information – i.e., if the player is a white, left-handed, neurotic, and conscientious person, base your calculations on the group batting averages of groups of white, left-handed, neurotic, and conscientious players? Or, would you dig into this particular player’s past batting performance to derive your calculation of probability, perhaps supplementing your inquiry with an individualized clinical assessment of the individual player’s current physical and psychological well being? Doing the former rather than the latter is much more typical of the statistically-based research practices of personality psychologists and the ways in which they draw implications

for individuals from aggregated group data (e.g., consider the kinds of implications included in the discussion sections of research articles reporting such studies).¹

A second defense employed by past and contemporary personality psychologists has been to expand their repertoire of methods to include more individualized forms of theory, inquiry, and assessment. An early attempt at such a defense was to combine theories of what was then referred to as depth psychology, albeit in a somewhat watered down form, with the measures and methods of personality psychology, and to teach such combined content in courses on personality theory. During the middle of the twentieth century, textbooks and courses on personality theory were a staple of most American programs in psychology. As [Danziger \(1997\)](#) notes,

The insinuation was that this [the combination of depth psychology and personality psychology] was ultimately the same thing was however false and misleading. Freud was not a personality theorist ... as [personality] had been constructed within American psychology. Indeed, there developed the extraordinary situation where the teaching of 'personality theory' and research on 'personality' went their separate ways. ... There was always a strong tendency to treat the empiricist construction as the metaphysically real one. (p. 131)

Not only does Danziger's analysis apply to the personality psychology of mid-twentieth century America, I think it continues to apply following the much-heralded rebirth of personality psychology during the past two decades. When leading personality psychologists like [Dan McAdams \(2009\)](#) speak about "the contemporary renaissance in personality studies," they typically include the measurement and statistical treatment of group aggregate data as part of, even central to, a science of individual persons. "While other branches of psychology offer many important insights into human behavior and experience, it is only personality psychology that focuses unwaveringly on the individual person – on your particular individuality as a person" (p. 24). "Personality psychology draws on fields as diverse as brain physiology, molecular genetics, evolutionary biology, cognitive science, sociology, cultural anthropology, and even literary studies in the study of whole persons. Consequently, personality psychology lies at the crossroads of many disciplines" (p. 24).

One can agree strongly with McAdam's description of the study of whole persons, and still question the inclusion of common measurement, research, and statistical practices of personality psychologists in an interdisciplinary undertaking aimed at understanding individual persons. The point is that both past and present attempts to redefine personality psychology as a more holistic study of persons unfortunately retain a highly problematic core of flawed

assumptions and practices concerning the relevance of group aggregate data to an understanding of particular individuals. No amount of reframing, however important or even essential the additions, ought obscure this fact.

What really is needed for a viable study of the whole person or whole human being is not only a carefully considered expansion of theories and methods, but a careful, critical pruning of conceptually and logically flawed, yet continuingly influential methodological and interpretive practices. Yet, even when Johnson recognizes that "it has been alleged that the traditional conceptual constraints of 20th century personality psychology have hindered, in some important respects, its laudable scientific goal of understanding the whole human and so resulted in an unnecessarily restricted model of humanity," he nonetheless embraces the language, methods, and assumptions of conventional personality psychology when he includes the sub-form of "personality signature [understood as] an individual's relatively unique configuration of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and relational dispositions that are relatively stable across situations and over time and that tend to distinguish one individual from others (which, together with others in the population, form between-personality taxonomies ...)." I think he needs to sharpen his pruning shears.

2. Different approaches to the self as subject and personal agent: an example of the need for greater attention to potentially incommensurable differences

My second concern in reaction to Johnson's essay is what I regard as his insufficient attention to possibly incommensurable differences across the various forms of the whole human being that constitute his pluriform. Based on what I already have said it should be clear that I regard some of the conceptions and methods of traditional personality psychology as incommensurable with the conceptions and methods that attend several of Johnson's other forms of the whole human being, and with his overall project of moving toward a science of individual persons. However, even within Johnson's more particular forms, I find possible incommensurabilities insufficiently attended. A good example can be drawn from his discussion of the "self as subject or personal agent." When discussing human agent causation, Johnson bundles some of my own work in this area ([Martin, Sugarman, & Thompson, 2003](#)) with the self-determination theory (SDT) of [Deci and Ryan \(2002\)](#). Unfortunately, such a grouping ignores important theoretical incompatibilities across these two attempts to theorize the human agent. Deci and Ryan are radical cognitive constructivists whose central tenet is that human agency is the exercise of autonomous motivation internal to each individual. Such motivation is, for the most part, foundational, universal, and innate.

Within SDT, the self is defined as the core of the synthetic processes within individuals. It is the means through which the innate integrative tendencies facilitate psychological growth and adaption to the social environment ... we maintain that the construct of self refers to synthetic, integrated functioning, which is

¹ Aggregate data drawn from groups of individuals may be appropriately thought of as potentially useful in framing conclusions, policies, and interventions intended to apply to groups of similar individuals, as long as such applications are not confused with understanding particular individuals. However, aggregated data of the kind typically collected and presented by personality psychologists cannot contribute to the science of the individual whole human being that Johnson seeks.

manifest in distinct neuropsychological, phenomenological, and functional processes. When people are acting from their integrated self, they will be autonomous in their actions and experience a high level of well-being. (Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2010, p. 184)

In contrast, my own position assumes that human agency is honed developmentally within particular forms of sociocultural tradition and relational practice. This is an agency that is understood as embedded and situated

... within historical sociocultural contexts, which in turn are nested in the biological and physical world. ... It is an agency that takes its meaning and much of its constitution from its sociocultural embeddedness, yet always is enabled and constrained by biological and physical factors, conditions, and processes. Nonetheless, while thus constituted, enabled, and constrained, it is not reducible to any of these other factors, conditions, and processes. Once emergent within its developmental trajectory, a path that is initiated ontogenetically by the birth of a human biological infant into the already existing physical and sociocultural world, it always may figure into its own determination. (Martin et al., 2003, pp. 133–134)

Johnson is correct that Deci and Ryan and Martin, Sugarman, and Thompson attempt to theorize human agency and human agent causation. However, they do so in ways that cannot possibly co-exist. “According to SDT, social contexts, whatever their level, have their impact on people by facilitating versus impairing satisfaction of basic psychological needs” (Deci & Ryan, 2012, p. 87). For Martin et al. (2003), there are no “basic psychological needs” or “innate integrative tendencies,” although there are basic biological and physical conditions that enable and constrain the ontogenetic development of selfhood and agency. For Deci and Ryan, the role of the social environment is to facilitate an inner core of psychological capability that exists in advance of sociocultural experience. For Martin, Sugarman, and Thompson, the relation between psychological selfhood and agency and sociocultural experience is a constitutive one in which psychological selfhood and agency are emergent within a biophysical human being’s active participation as part of the sociocultural world. These are different theories of how selfhood and agency come into being, and they are mutually exclusive. If Deci and Ryan are correct, Martin, Sugarman, and Thompson are wrong. Perhaps there are ways of integrating some of the better ideas from both these theories of human agency, but any such attempt cannot consist simply of grouping them together without sufficient regard for their directly oppositional differences. If a genuinely comprehensive conceptualization of the whole person is to emerge, there must be a carefully critical and selective fitting that goes beyond a cataloging of potential pieces.

3. The possibility of a psychology of personhood

I want to iterate that in raising concerns about what I regard as insufficient critical selection and insufficient attention to possible incommensurability in Johnson’s

proposal, I nonetheless applaud his enthusiasm for a wholistic view of the person within psychology and the importance of his project. Putting persons at the center of psychological theory and research is an aim that I share with Johnson and several other contemporary psychologists (e.g., Harré, 1998; Martin & Bickhard, 2012, 2013; McAdams, 2009; Smythe, 1998). Further, despite some important differences with some of these others, I have the greatest respect for their work and find considerable intellectual stimulation in our various points of agreement and disagreement. In the space that remains to me, I want to elaborate briefly the kind of critical pluralistic engagement that I think might help those of us committed to a psychology of personhood to make productive use of our differences, and to describe what I regard as two impediments to a critical, pluralistic study of persons within psychology.

In my 2010 piece advocating a critically engaged pluralism, I built upon George Herbert Mead’s (1934, 1938) conceptualization of a problem-solving community. In such a community, “members pool and coordinate their resources and capabilities to engage productively with each other in pursuit of shared projects” (Martin, 2010, p. 224). The key to this kind of communal interactivity is an excitement about engaging alternative perspectives and possibilities, an excitement for the stimulation that issues from sincere attempts to understand how the views and positions of others differ from one’s own and a willingness to consider critically one’s own views and positions in light of new possibilities that emerge at the intersection of engagement across alternative, including incommensurable, perspectives. It is through sustained exchanges of views, honest and sincere argument about differences, and a willingness to work collaboratively to sharpen, delimit, and critique contending perspectives that productive reformulations, reconstructions, and partial syntheses might arise that meet the demands of the problem situation and yield coherent, non-contradictory, and heuristically powerful ways of moving forward. For Mead, the sustaining of such critically engaged and engaging pluralistic encounters and processes was the hallmark of flourishing in both science and life.

With such a description of a problem-solving community in mind, it is sobering to focus attention on two ideological commitments embraced by many psychologists and disciplinary psychology itself that in my opinion make it difficult for us psychologists to participate openly and actively within a broader intellectual community that requires critical engagement with a diversity of perspectives. One of these worldviews is psychologism, defined as an overly strong attachment to or preference for explanations that privilege inner psychological causes. The other is scientism, defined as an overly strong attachment to or preference for a narrow range of methods and procedures that are deemed scientific without sufficient critical reflection on the appropriateness of such methods and procedures for particular phenomena and questions concerning them.

4. Psychologism

It is not surprising that most psychologists prefer forms of explanation that locate determinants or causes within

the biological or psychological make-up of individual persons. After all, psychology's standing as a pre-eminent social science, especially in North America, is predicated on its success as a science of individuals. Psychologists see themselves as experts concerning the inner workings of minds, brains, psychological states and traits, cognitive structures and schemata, motivational and emotional processes, and so forth. Their expertise is assumed to reside in special capabilities to understand, measure, and demonstrate the causal potency of such internal factors, entities, structures, and processes. This is not to say that psychologists fail to consider social and cultural influences. However, the way in which such influences typically are considered functions to preserve the causal hegemony of the human interior. To stay with a previous example, self-determination theory (SDT) holds that "human beings can be proactive and engaged or, alternatively, passive and alienated, largely as a function of the social conditions in which they develop and function" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). But how does this recognition of possible social causation actually play out in research on self-determination? First, research that considers potentially important social factors is mostly concerned with how these contextual variables "facilitate versus forestall the natural processes of self-motivation and healthy psychological development ... specifically, factors that enhance versus undermine intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, and well being" (p. 68). Secondly, the interpretations given to the findings of such research give primacy to psychological causes – "The findings have led to the postulate of three innate psychological needs – competence, autonomy, and relatedness – which when satisfied yield enhanced self-motivation and mental health and when thwarted lead to diminished motivation and well-being" (p. 68). Finally, methods and practices of intervention based on this interpretation of the relevant research are developed, recommended, and implemented in areas such as education, health care, work, sport, and psychotherapy. The vast majority of these interventions take the form of encouraging the establishment of contexts supportive of the satisfaction of the innate psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. One of the most efficient and effective ways of ensuring that these needs are satisfied is to encourage educators, health providers, business executives, coaches, and psychotherapists to be more "autonomy supportive, thus allowing the person to feel competent, related, and autonomous" (p. 74).

In contrast, and also consistent with what was said earlier, those committed to the social constitution of selfhood and agency through participation in social, cultural practices, narratives, and traditions would interpret the research on social contexts supportive of self-determination theory as demonstrating only that particular kinds of social interaction, ways of talking, and socially-sanctioned types of interpretation serve to constitute an understanding of one's self and one's ways of acting as an autonomous agent. In this more direct model of social constitution, there is no need to posit innate psychological needs, the existence of which is understood to be universal. What makes the SDT program of inquiry and intervention psychologistic is that when all is said and done

it is the psychological worldview and commitments of Deci, Ryan, and others that posit the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as universal and foundational motivations of an inner self. This is a self that is defined as "the core of the synthetic processes within individuals ... [as] the means through which the innate integrative tendencies facilitate psychological growth and adaption to the social environment" in ways that allow individuals to "be autonomous in their actions and experience a high level of well-being" (Niemic et al., 2010, p. 184). None of these "innate integrative tendencies" or their functioning in the ways described is empirically based. They and their ineluctability are assumed, not discovered. When these assumptions are set aside, other possible interpretations can be considered, ones that perhaps are more parsimonious and more directly related (i.e., without an ideologically mandated privileging of natural, internal psychological needs) to the nature and exercise of human agency.

The challenge of overcoming the psychologism that is so deeply entrenched in psychology is well illustrated by the great difficulty many psychologists have in considering alternatives like that of social constitutionism that do not grant ontological necessity or epistemological primacy to innate, interior psychological needs, processes, or structures. As already hinted, I believe that this difficulty is at least partially explained by the failure of many psychologists to recognize explicitly the nature of their psychologistic assumptions or the fact that they are assumptions rather than empirically verified facts about human beings. The challenge is somehow to open these assumptions to critical consideration, so that they can be debated with and against other possibilities.

5. Scientism

The scientism of psychology is perhaps most evident in its historically almost complete reliance on experimental design, quantitative measurement, and inferential statistical analyses in the almost total absence of evidence that these scientific practices as used in psychological inquiry have produced anything remotely resembling the well known laws of physical science. Whereas measurement in the natural sciences is ontic, in that it is applied to existing objects or properties using a scale, point of departure, and standard unit, measurement in psychology is mostly a matter of collecting and counting the ratings of human beings on items designed to differentiate degrees of agreement, liking, resemblance, and so forth in the absence of known units or metrics. Whereas the mathematics (e.g., calculus) used in the physical sciences document and predict exacting occurrences, patterns, and objects with pinpoint accuracy under carefully specified conditions, the inferential statistics used by psychologists depend on variability and are utilized to find some comparatively loosely articulated difference in support of a relatively vague hypothesis in the relative absence of specifically articulated contextual conditions. When it is suggested, as it has been repeatedly and powerfully (see Teo, 2005 for a detailed history and Michell, 1999 for a contemporary example) that many of the phenomena of interest to

psychologists, such as intelligence, creativity, selfhood, agency, or personhood may not be single quantities for which exacting measurement and rigorous experimentation are either possible or appropriate, such suggestions are given short shrift, perhaps because they are seen as being dangerous ideas that threaten the scientific foundations of psychology.

The hard truth is that psychological science has not produced any laws to rival those of physics or revealed any causal mechanisms with the articulation and predictability of at least some biophysical mechanisms. The reality is that there is little evidence of the genuinely scientific yield that the wielding of psychology's scientific methods is supposed to ensure. In such a progressive vacuum, critical engagement with alternative ontological, epistemological, and methodological perspectives and possibilities seems warranted. Unfortunately, such critical engagement is, for the most part, curtailed unduly by psychological scientism, not rendered unnecessary by the rich epistemic and ontological yields of psychological science.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I agree wholeheartedly with Johnson that the whole human being or person is an important, if not the most important, object for psychological inquiry. What is desperately required if psychology is to enter the broad field of relevant scholarship on personhood and attempt to understand the human condition and individual human beings in all their fullness is a greater openness to relevant perspectives and inquiry practices across a full range of the sciences and applied sciences, social sciences, humanities, and arts. In the words of Sigmund Koch, "Because of the immense range of the psychological studies, different areas of study will not only require different ... methods but will bear affinities to different members of the broad groupings of inquiry as historically conceived" (1999, p. 416). "[P]sychologists must finally accept the circumstance that extensive and important sectors of psychological study require modes of inquiry rather more like those of the humanities than the sciences" (p. 416). "To admit intellectual finitude, and to accept with courage our antinomial condition, is to go a long way toward curing our characteristic epistemopathies. To attain such an attitude is to be free" (p. 416). I'm sure that Johnson would agree. I also think a legitimate psychology of personhood must engage within this expanded tableau of relevant perspectives and possibilities with a *critical consideration* that attempts to

resolve or go beyond obvious incommensurabilities across existing perspectives and methods. In short, if there is to be a thriving psychology of personhood in the future of psychology, it will need to be more than a cataloging of possibilities. I hope Johnson also might accept this conditional endorsement of his project.

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