



Mapping the field of the whole human: Toward a form psychology

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ABSTRACT

The concept of personality has served as the model of the whole human being within modern psychology for most of the 20th century. However, the original reasons for this selection were based on philosophical assumptions that have since come to be rejected by philosophers of science. Other approaches to the whole human have been identified within psychology, as well as philosophy and theology, which can also serve as models of the whole human in psychology, and which highlight additional, distinctly human kinds of psychological wholeness. The value of a number of the most important models will be discussed, and it will be suggested that the concept of form could serve as a higher-order concept for the psychological subdiscipline of the whole human being.

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Since the founding of modern American psychology, there has been the recognition that a science of individual human beings has among its responsibilities the description of the “whole human.” William James (1890), for example, in his classic “Principles of Psychology,” devoted a chapter to the consciousness of the self. The advent of behaviorism led to a much greater focus on molecular dynamics (stimulus–response units) than to molar considerations in the first half of the 20th century. Yet in spite of these pressures, Gordon Allport (1937), Henry Murray (1938), and Ross Stagner (1937) (among others) contributed to the founding of a subdiscipline that was focused on the whole human and was consistent with the concerns of the reigning philosophy of science of the day, and they settled on *personality* as its focus. As a result, for the latter half of the 20th century, a course in personality was required in most undergraduate psychology programs, and hundreds of Ph.D.’s were awarded in this area.

A renewed wave of more sophisticated molecularism struck the field in the 60s and 70s, due in part to the cognitive revolution and empowered by new research methods that demonstrated the power of the situation to

influence human behavior and interact with internal factors like personality traits (Mischel, 1973). Enough questions were being raised about the existence of personality that, for a time, in some circles, personality study was eclipsed by or at least competed with social psychology.

Proponents of personality “fought back” with their own comprehensive research, in which they documented better the cross-situational resilience of traits (though this debate is far from over). As a result, over the last 25 years, a modest revival of personality psychology has been occurring, more dynamic and sophisticated than ever before, strengthened by the controversies and by creative research and theorizing that has moved in some new and synergistic directions (Cervone, 2004; John, Robins, & Pervin, 2008; Mayer, 2005; McAdams, 1993; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Mischel & Shoda, 2008).

1. Deeper questions

Consequently, the field is currently in some degree of foment, so this may be a good time to step back and ask some foundational questions. For example, why did modern psychology adopt *personality* as its approach to the “whole human” and reject other alternatives current in the literature (like character and the self)? How comprehensive, in

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fact, is the study of personality conducted by modern psychology? Are there other legitimate psychological perspectives on the “whole human” that are left out of the modern study of personality? For example, are there other bodies of thought and research, both contemporary and ancient that also describe the “whole human” in valid and illuminating ways, but provide a different perspective on human beings than that of personality? In the following article it will be suggested that answers to these questions could lead the field of the whole human into a more comprehensive multiperspective subdiscipline that altogether would better describe the actual nature of human beings and their unique complexity (and thus increase its validity).

This will require the recognition that, while rightly aiming at and over time increasingly approximating a valid description of reality, science is also shaped by sociohistorical, philosophical, and political forces that exercise their influence mostly implicitly, and so usually outside the awareness of the scientists themselves. Personality psychology is no exception (Danziger, 1990, 1997; Mischel, 1992; Nicholson, 2003; Sanford, 1992).

Though there is not space here to demonstrate these claims fully, some justification is obviously necessary. According to many cultural historians, and historians of psychology and sociology, a revolution was occurring in the cultural life of America in the late 1800s and early 1900s that involved a radical shift in basic beliefs among America's intellectual and educational leaders (Cushman, 1996; Danziger, 2008; Marsden, 1994; Robinson, 1981; Smith, 2003)—the move from a theistic to a naturalistic worldview—and modern psychology played a crucial role in this transition. Moreover, one of the methods used to promote this shift was a change in language (Danziger, 1997; Nicholson, 2003).

1.1. *The logic and legacy of positivism*

A major impetus for the “new psychology” that emerged in the late 1800s was positivism. First articulated by Auguste Comte (1798–1857), positivism is a system of assumptions regarding what can count for “positive” knowledge. According to Boring (1950), “positive” for Comte meant “not speculative or inferential,” but “basic, observational, preinferential, undebatable” (p. 633). The seemingly unresolvable religious and philosophical conflicts of previous centuries and the successes of the scientific revolution had convinced many in Europe that human knowledge had to be based strictly on empirical evidence, rather than philosophical, theological, or traditional sources. This entailed the rejection of metaphysics (the philosophical subdiscipline concerned with the nature of things, including the nature of God and human beings) and the making of any metaphysical claims and concentrating exclusively on the investigation of the objective world. Comte sought to ground all “positive” assertions about reality on a strictly empirical basis. As a result, claims about anything that could not be verified through observation (and the logical and analytic discipline of mathematics) were considered mere speculation and unworthy of the word “knowledge.”

There were two later stages of positivism that also shaped modern American psychology: Machian and logical positivism. Influenced by Comte, as well as Hume and Mill, one of Ernst Mach's goals was to restrict scientific discourse completely to descriptions of sensations and direct experience, in order to “rid science once and for all of every trace of ‘metaphysics’” (Robinson, 1992, p. 65; Hergenhahn, 1997). Many of the early modern psychologists after Wundt (e.g., Külpe, Ebbinghaus, Titchener, James) affirmed Mach's understanding of science (Danziger, 1979). However, logical positivism had the greatest direct impact on 20th century American psychology. Accepting the basic orientation of Comte and Mach, logical positivists developed a philosophy of science in the 1920s and 1930s that was easily the most impressive of its day. They sought to base science solely on observations, by developing a rigorous set of logical rules for relating empirical terms and theoretical terms, enabling scientists to avoid reliance on any empirically unverifiable (metaphysical or epistemological) assumptions in their work (Suppe, 1977). For three decades this model persuaded most American scientists that ethical and metaphysical discourse was (quite literally) irrational nonsense.¹

Modern American psychology was already heavily under the sway of positivism by the time logical positivism emerged in the 1930s (Danziger, 1979; Klein, 1970; Leahey, 1997; Robinson, 1981; Toulmin & Leary, 1992:²). Its rigor led many of the leading psychologists of the day to seek to apply its model to their discipline, and convinced the majority of psychologists of that generation of the superlative value of the study of animal behavior and to reject reference to unprovable, non-observable, metaphysical entities like thoughts, volition, the self, and ethics. Everything in psychology

¹ This is not the place to explain in detail the developments in philosophy of science and epistemology that led to the overturning of the “received view” of logical positivism. Those interested may wish to consult Alston (1992), Kuhn (1962, 1977), Lakatos (1970), Polanyi (1958, 1966), Suppe (1977), Toulmin (1972), and Toulmin and Leary (1992). The most serious problem was that positivism was recognized to be self-refuting since it is based on a claim about knowledge that itself cannot be empirically verified (e.g., only propositions that can be empirically verified are true), and the same applies to other principles basic to science (e.g., the functioning of the world is uniform). Kuhn (1962) wrote the most influential critique of the received view by documenting historically that progress in science actually occurs as a result of social and institutional dynamics that involve subjective processes, as well as rationality and careful observation. For example, scientists assume and work within a paradigm—a set of beliefs that include observational and theoretical postulates, as well as presuppositions that cannot necessarily be proven. Though elements of Kuhn's treatment of the issues have been criticized (Suppe, 1977), contemporary philosophy of science has left positivism far behind (see e.g., Ray, 2000). Also of interest to psychology are more sophisticated models of epistemology that have arisen since (that have influenced the present work). It is ironic that whereas the psychology of the 1930s seemed to be overly smitten with the philosophy of science of its day, psychology since then has largely maintained the tradition and not kept up with the ongoing developments in contemporary philosophy of science and epistemology (see for example, Alston, 2006; Audi, 2002; Moser, 2005; Newton-Smith, 2000; Sosa, 2009).

² Four decades previously Williams James (1890) had endorsed and expounded a broadly positivist vision of psychology. See Vol. 1, p. 183.

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