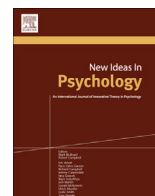


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A unified psychology of the person?



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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

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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

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