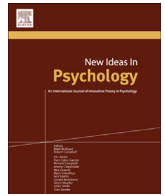




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Going where the action is to conceptualize the person

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary psychology is highly structured in terms of conventional and traditional methodological practices, including fragmenting, objectifying, and aggregating. Such practices sometimes impede understanding and investigating the person in terms of what he/she does as an integrated active individual who develops. The goal of this paper is to outline a systems conceptualization of the person as a developing individual who acts in relation to others in cultural practices. Such action is conceptualized as emerging through multiple and interrelated individual, social, and cultural processes, as well as in terms of multiple and interrelated domains of functioning that develop. This conceptualization is applicable to a wide range of issues in psychology as a whole. Moreover, starting with an overall conceptualization of action provides ways to overcome some limitations of conventional practices, and also provides a basis for conducting systematic and integrative research on the person.

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In the beginning, there was philosophy, and then in 1879 Wilhelm Wundt created experimental psychology by conducting experiments on perception in a shabby laboratory in Leipzig, Germany. Or so the creation story goes. By identifying psychology with “the” scientific method of the natural sciences, psychology gained status as a “real” science. In doing so, psychologists began distancing themselves from articulating theoretical conceptions of what it means to be a human being or person. Today, experimentalism dominates psychology, and psychology is largely defined in terms of conventional and traditional methodological practices that originated in the natural sciences. As such, psychological inquiry typically starts with methods, which shape the kinds of questions and issues that psychologists study. I recently listened in shock when a colleague proclaimed that standard deviation is psychology’s most important concept. I thought to myself, what about the person, and what about action? Surely they are among psychology’s most important concepts. Methods and statistics are tools, and like any tool, some are better suited for investigating certain questions and issues than others. Thus, before choosing a method of investigation, it is first necessary to identify and conceptualize the subject matter of psychology. Insofar as what people *do* is the subject matter of psychology, it behooves us to start by conceptualizing *action*. Then we can go on to raising questions and issues for empirical investigation based on that conceptualization, and

subsequently we can construct methods that are suited for addressing those questions and issues empirically.

In this paper, I define a person as someone who acts, and my goal for this paper is to outline a conceptualization of action in a way that encompasses the dynamics of multiple and interrelated processes. First, I present an overview of three conventional practices in psychology that divert attention away from understanding the action of a whole person, namely, fragmenting, objectifying, and aggregating. In the second section of the paper, I outline a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the person in terms of acting in relation to others in cultural practices. The paper ends with some implications and directions for future theory and research.

1. Conventional methodological assumptions and practices in psychology

The following presentation is meant to point to some of the ways in which common assumptions and practices in contemporary psychology divert our attention away from understanding the person in terms of how his/her action is constituted by the complex dynamics of varied and interrelated processes. In no way do I mean to suggest that experimental methods be abandoned or discarded wholesale. They are useful tools for addressing certain kinds of empirical issues and questions. However, problems arise when they are the starting point of psychological inquiry, and when relying on them leads to explicitly or implicitly overlooking or dismissing other methods.

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1.1. Fragmenting

Over the course of decades, psychological inquiry has become narrowly focused and fragmented as psychologists slice human functioning up into separate domains (e.g., perceiving, thinking, feeling, interacting with others, using language, self/identity, motivation, consciousness), and conduct research on these aspects of human functioning in relative isolation. According to its website, fifty six separate divisions currently comprise the American Psychological Association, and thousands of studies about separate aspects of behavior fill innumerable professional journals in psychology. Fragmenting practices are based on the Cartesian assumption that scientific knowledge proceeds by separating or splitting a phenomenon into parts that are taken to be “mutually exclusive pure forms or elements” (Overton, 2013, p. 38). Overton explains further that within a splitting or fragmenting approach, “decomposition” is the starting premise, and leads to “breaking the aggregate down to its smallest pieces, to its bedrock” (p. 38).

Within fragmented or split areas of specialization, psychologists focus on separate fragments or bits of behavior, with less attention to linking a particular behavioral bit to the whole functioning of a whole person. Training to conduct psychological analysis in this way begins early. Undergraduate introductory psychology textbooks are organized around separate bits and aspects of behavior, from the brain, to development, to sensation, to perception, to consciousness, to learning, to memory, to thinking, to language, to emotion, to motivation, to personality. I personally feel alienated when I watch students applying to graduate school, as they anxiously try to choose an area of specialization, and apply to work with a particular faculty member, all before graduating from college!

One is left overwhelmed and asking: How does it all go together? Where is the whole person whose functioning involves these bits of behavior simultaneously? We have slices of behavior, but we have lost sight of the whole pie within which the slices function and have meaning. As people go about their lives in all corners of the world, these domains or aspects of functioning do not occur separately. A person does not perceive the world for a few minutes, then go on to feeling joy or sadness or anger for a few minutes, then use language, then go back to perceiving, then start thinking, then perhaps go back to feeling, then become conscious, and then maybe interact with someone before going back to thinking. Rather, these aspects of functioning refer to ongoing and simultaneously occurring processes that together comprise what a person is doing at any given moment of analysis (Raeff, 2016). Calls for integrative approaches in psychology suggest that psychologists are concerned about the field’s fragmentation. For example, in 2015, the Association for Psychological Science initiated the biennial International Convention of Psychological Science specifically to promote integrative approaches.

Fragmenting also includes the statistical practice of “partitioning the variance” as a way to identify independent causes and sources of behavioral variation. Experiments further require defining “independent” variables, and calculating their independent effects on some behavioral outcome. These practices are based on the assumption that human functioning is caused by separate or independent factors that occur in isolation or independently of one another. For example, debates have long raged in psychology over how much of development can be attributed to genetic factors and how much can be attributed to environmental factors. These debates are based on the assumption that the causes of development are independent or separate, and combine additively to cause behavioral outcomes. However, an abundance of research shows that genes and the environment mutually constitute each other (Goldhaber, 2012; Gottlieb & Halpern, 2002; Gottlieb, 2007;

Lewontin, 2000; Wahlsten, 2013). As such, they are dependent on one another, rather than independent variables that contribute separately to behavior and development. They are, in other words, both 100% necessary, and it is important discern how they function in relation to each other as inseparable constituents of a wider whole.

1.2. Objectifying

As the title of this special issue suggests, psychologists tend to treat people as if they were inanimate objects or things. Billig (2013) argues that publications in psychology are full of nouns that ostensibly characterize human psychological phenomena, and that there is little in the way of describing and explaining what actual people are *doing*. Using nouns and talking about psychological processes in terms of objects is a metaphorical move with serious consequences. When nouns are used to describe and explain psychological processes, those processes are metaphorically turned into static objects or things that people can have or possess, such as traits, memories, or thoughts. It is useful to step back and question what it could mean to have or possess traits, memories, or thoughts. Are thoughts tangible, discrete, or bounded objects that one can possess, the way one can possess a car or a computer? Do we have thoughts and memories the way we have arms and legs and lungs? Certainly, human cognition is partly physical, but thinking is a dynamic process, and we do not have thoughts in the way that we have cars or body parts.

To avoid some of the limitations of viewing psychological processes as things, an alternative is to start by conceptualizing the person primarily in terms of what he/she does, or in terms of action. Towards that end, we can work to use verb forms as much as possible (Billig, 2013). Using verb forms, such as to think and thinking, leads us to discerning what people DO when they think, and to the dynamic processes that are involved in thinking. As Harré and Gillett (1994) put it, “The mind is not a substance. The mentality of people comprises certain of their skills and abilities” (p. 100). Along similar lines, by positing “mind as action,” Wertsch (1998) argues that what we refer to as the mind ultimately involves varied ways of acting, such as thinking, planning, deciding, and remembering.

Objectifying is also evident in psychological analyses of the causes of human functioning, or analyses of why people do what they do. How to understand and explain why people do what they do is an incredibly complex issue that has vexed scholars for centuries. As Witherington (e.g., *this special issue*) explains, Aristotle famously identified four types of causality, known as efficient, material, formal, and final causes. In keeping with methods that are used in the natural sciences, psychology is replete with analyses of efficient and material causality. Referring to efficient causes involves considering “the antecedent conditions for a phenomenon to explain it” and “Material causes invoke the material substance or substrate underlying a phenomenon” (Witherington & Heying, 2015, p. 346). If people are physical objects, then their functioning can be understood and explained in the same efficient and material terms as the causes of non-human physical objects or things. For example, a prototypical case of efficient physical causality is of a pool ball rolling across a pool table because it has just been hit with a certain amount of force at a certain angle by another pool ball, which was hit by a cue stick at the hands of a particular pool player. This approach to causality leads to attributing people’s behavior mostly to quantifiable antecedent and independent causes.

However, this approach to causality may obfuscate the roles of final and formal causes in constituting human functioning. Final causality involves explaining a phenomenon in terms of goals and

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