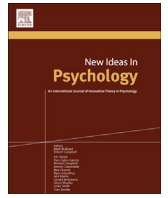




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## How objectivity undermines the study of personhood: Toward an intersubjective epistemology for psychological science

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### ABSTRACT

As a science, psychology embraces the value of *objectivity*. An objective observation is one that is (a) based upon *publically observable* phenomena (i.e., overt behavior); (b) *unbiased*, in the sense that it records only what was observed, without either adding or taking away from the observation, and (c) an *accurate* representation of the world *as it truly is*. To understand the person, however, it is necessary to come to grips with seemingly elusive concepts such as *agency*, *symbolism*, *experience*, *meaning*, *intersubjectivity*, and *morality*. Such concepts make reference to phenomena that are not observable in way that one can observe objects in the physical world of space and time. In this paper, I examine how psychology's commitment to objectivity obscures our ability to understand persons. A remnant of the Cartesian distinction between a mind and body, the principle of objectivity forces psychologists to seek "objective" indicators of "subjective" processes. Following Wittgenstein and recent research on the mirror resonance system, I argue that psychological knowledge arises neither from within (subjectively) nor from without (objectively), but instead from between (intersubjectively). To understand what it means to be a person, we must abandon the false distinction between objectivity and subjectivity, and embrace an epistemology based on intersubjectivity.

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When I was an undergraduate psychology student one of my contemporaries complained to our tutor that they had chosen to study psychology because they: "...wanted to understand people—not to measure them doing 'silly things' and turn them into numbers...". At the time I was rather impressed by this argument and rather shocked by my tutor's characteristically robust response. He answered by suggesting that, if the student simply wanted to ponder the nature of people, then they might be better off reading the novels of Jane Austen or Tolstoy – but we were here to do science (Ayton, 1998, pp. 1–2).

Psychology seems to have a person problem. Psychology is the discipline that deals with the nature of the psychological functioning of individuals. However, with exceptions, the *person* is conspicuously absent in psychological theory and research (Martin & Bickhard, 2013). This was not always the case. During the first half of the 20th century, seminal theorists in psychology proposed "grand theories" of personality and psychological functioning (Hall & Lindzey, 1957). Such theories fell out of favor with their failure to

generate scientifically testable hypotheses (Bergmann & Spence, 1941). In the passage quoted above, Ayton (1998) appears to dismiss the goal of understanding persons as incompatible with the hard-nosed demands of science. In this paper, I argue that it is indeed possible to study persons systematically; however, doing so requires that we proceed from a different model of science.

### 1. What is a person?

A person is simultaneously a *biological*, *psychological* and *socio-cultural* being. As a biological being, a person is a living system. Like all living systems, humans are capable of regulating their own internal processes in response to environmental demands. As biological systems, humans differ from other animals with regards to many anatomical and physiological qualities, including brain size, brain organization, opposable thumb, use of energy, lacrimation, and many other characteristics (O'Bleness, Searles, Varki, Gagneaux, & Kikela, 2012).

What, however, does it mean to be a *psychological* being? This question seeks to define the core of the subject matter of psychological science. According to the American Psychological Association, Psychology consist of "the scientific study of the *behavior* of individuals and their *mental* processes" (APA, 2016). This definition,

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born of compromise rather than principle, does little to clarify what it means to speak of a *psychological* process. It has its origins in the Cartesian distinction between “mind” and “body”. As is well known, Descartes distinguished between an incorporeal mind and a material body. While the subjective mind operates according to its own principles, the observable body, as a physical mechanism, operates according to mechanical laws. Although psychology has long rejected the idea of an incorporeal mind, it nonetheless retained the contrast between an inner mental sphere (i.e., “mental processes”) and an outer observable one (i.e., “behavior”). A remnant of behaviorism, the reference to *behavior* reflects the continued quest for precision in the form of publically observable events. While the invocation of “mental processes” or “mind” gestures toward some type of psychological content, its meaning is left entirely unspecified. And so, what makes a process a psychological one?

One way to address this question is to ask, “Is there anything that all processes that we call ‘psychological’ have in common? That is, is there anything common to *sensing, perceiving, emoting, cognizing, remembering, thinking, dreaming, acting*, and so forth?” One might suggest that all psychological processes appear to be *activities* mediated by some form of *meaning* (Wertsch, 1998). Expanding upon this idea, it is possible to identify a series of categories that span the range of psychological functioning. An (a) *activity* is a process that occurs over time. It implies some capacity for (b) *agency* (Sugarman, 2005) – the ability for the human organism to exert control over goal-related operations. As an aspect of ongoing activity, (c) *meaning* can be understood as the *structuring of experience* (Werner & Kaplan, 1962) – where (d) *experience* consists the *awareness* of phenomenal aspects self and world (Farnell & Varela, 2008). A central aspect of experience is (e) *evaluation* – the experience of *valence* and the capacity to form systems of value, morality and strong evaluation (Taylor, 1989). There are at least as many forms of meaning as there are ways of experiencing. Among these forms, symbolic meanings (e.g., signs and symbols) take on special significance, as they enable individuals to create worlds that extend beyond the here-and-now of immediate experience (Burke, 1963/1964). Among humans, symbolism brings forth a higher-order capacity for (f) *self-awareness* – the ability to turn consciousness upon itself and represent one’s own processes and products. In humans, the form social identities takes on great importance. Perhaps the most profound of human motives is the attempt to identify and preserve valued images of self (Taylor, 1989).

As socio-cultural beings, persons operate as *relational agents* (Gergen, 2009) whose actions are mediated by shared, historically-shaped meanings that are distributed throughout a social group or linguistic community (Mascolo, 2004). As relational beings, social action is mediated by the capacity for *intersubjectivity* (Mascolo, 2016; Trevarthen & Aitkin, 2001) – the capacity to share and coordinate experience *between* individuals (Matusov, 1996). The human capacity for intersubjectivity supports the emergence of *shared intentionality* – the human ability to be jointly aware of each other’s goals and intentions (Tomasello & Herrmann, 2010). Together with language, this form of intersubjectivity provides the basis for the construction of culture.

Bringing together biological, psychological and socio-cultural categories, one might define *persons* as *self-conscious, agentive, relational animals who, by virtue of their capacity for symbolism and intersubjective engagement, act on the basis of their identifications with social systems of meaning and value*. From the standpoint of this definition, there is no need to differentiate the “mental” from the “behavioral”. For example, meaning and experience are not properties of a separate mental realm; instead, they are properties of *action in the social world*.

## 2. Obstacles to a science of personhood

Is it possible to develop a science of the *person*? Common assumptions about the nature of scientific inquiry obstruct progress toward this goal. Psychology remains committed to a model of science organized around the value of *objectivity*. Because of *a priori* methodological commitments, we often relegate the human aspects of psychological life to secondary status. We ignore foundational questions about the psychological nature of persons: What does it mean to be an *agent*? How can we describe the structure of phenomenal experience? What is the role of *meaning* in human action? In representing psychological predicates as hidden and subjective, the quest for objectivity limits attempts to understand the psychological richness of personhood.

However, science is not a fixed process or static set of rules (Richardson, 1998). Arguably, the most central values of science include an unwillingness to accept truth statements simply based on *authority* (Manzo, 2006) and the *systematic* use of *evidence* (Allen & Clough, 2015) to advance understanding. What counts as *systematic* and *evidence*, however, are considerations that must be adapted to the subject matter of the science (Yanchar, Gantt, & Clay, 2005). To create a model of the person, it is necessary to acknowledge the *intersubjective* – rather than either “objective” or “subjective” – origins of psychological knowledge (Iacombini, 2011; Overgaard, 2005). A psychology informed by a rigorous intersubjectivity would be empowered to confront questions about the *psychological* categories of personhood – namely, the nature of human *agency, experience, meaning* and *values* directly as they arise and are expressed in *interpersonal* relations with others.

## 3. To understand persons, we must move beyond Cartesian dualities

In rejecting the idea that the “mind” as an incorporeal thinking substance, psychology embraced the “body” pole of the mind/body distinction – and with it, the objectivist methods used in the scientific study of the body. However, psychology never really resolved the tension between the idea of a hidden, agentive, psychological interior and an observable, caused, materialist exterior (ter Hark, 1990). From an objectivist point of view, psychological events are opaque; we can only make inferences about the experiential life of persons from our observations of external behavior. However, while we may understand physical objects through examination and inference of their observable properties and movements, psychological understanding is mediated by our capacity for *intersubjective* engagement with others (Reddy, 2015). If this is so, then the processes by which we come to know the psychological world of persons *differ fundamentally* from those we use to understand bodies and objects (Martin & Sugarman, 2009). Consequently, it makes no sense to insist that psychological science be limited to the procedures used to study objects. To say that psychological science must embrace objectivity *because science demands it* is an appeal to authority. If science rejects appeals to authority as a source of knowledge (Manzo, 2006), it cannot justify its own methods through such appeals. A genuinely scientific approach must adapt itself to the particularities of its subject matter. To do this, there is a need to transcend a suite of Cartesian tensions that continue to structure psychological work.

### 3.1. Public behavior versus private experience

A series of philosophical, psychological and empirical arguments challenges the Cartesian idea that psychological experience is an inherently private phenomenon. A particularly powerful example is Wittgenstein’s (1953) argument against the possibility

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