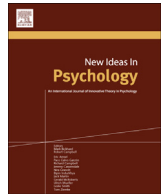




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Studying persons in context: Taking social psychological reality seriously

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ABSTRACT

Herein, I describe and illustrate the materiality and objectivity of sociocultural and psychological reality. I contend that many well-known problems in ensuring that psychological inquiry is obviously and properly connected to its primary subject matter, “persons in context,” may be understood as related to the apparent inability of many psychologists and schools of psychology to take historically-established sociocultural and psychological reality seriously. The example I use is a brief, joint biographical study of the sociocultural and psychological contexts within which Carl Rogers and B. F. Skinner were positioned and came to position themselves with respect to issues of freedom and control. This study provides a particular and concrete example of the sociocultural and psychological constitution of personhood, selfhood, and human agency as emergent and lived in particular lives. Throughout the article, the material, objective bases for social-cultural and psychological personhood are emphasized.

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Persons, like all animals, are creatures in context. What distinguishes persons from other creatures are the manner and extent of the co-constitutional dynamics that pertain within the person-world nexus. These dynamics are participatory and relational. Throughout their complexly intertwined evolutionary, historical-cultural, and social-psychological development, persons and their activities are constituted¹ within the biophysical and sociocultural contexts they, through their activities, continuously transform. They have evolved and developed as uniquely self-determining, within the affordances and limits of the participatory and relational dynamics that govern their existence.² In previous articles published in this journal (Martin, 2010, 2012a, 2015), I have advanced and argued for these and related ideas. However, in my own judgment, I have not succeeded in being as clear as I would like to be about the kind of sociocultural and psychological realism I believe a full-blooded psychology of personhood requires.

The fact that persons often are defined by a suite of powers or

capabilities they can and do exercise should never yield to the temptation to render these powers resident solely in individual persons. Such an understanding is psychologism,³ not good psychology. It is true that persons are typically and potentially capable of first person experience and perspective, moral and rational agency, autobiographical narrativizing, social and psychological identity, two-way volitional control, self reflection and interpretation, and so on. None of this is in question. However, these capabilities are not the powers of sui generis individuals or their various internal structures and organs, including the brain. These capabilities arise and are maintained through the interactive participation of embodied persons embedded in their worldly contexts. The allures of psychologism must be resisted if persons are to be understood fully as the kinds of real, self-determining beings they are. To conceptualize persons outside of the relational and participatory dynamics of the person-context nexus is to misunderstand them and to court not only psychologism, but also individualism and reductionism.

In this essay, I reject psychologism, individualism, and

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¹ To say that persons and their activities are constituted within their worldly contexts is to say that they are constructed, composed, created, facilitated, and enabled by participatory interactivity within those contexts, especially through the processes and practices that govern that interactivity.

² The self-determination of persons is dynamically and continuously constituted within the worldly activity and experience of persons in context. It is not some thing that exists solely within persons.

³ Psychologism often is described as the view that psychology is basic or foundational to all other forms of human inquiry. However, herein, I take psychologism to be more narrowly and perhaps perniciously defined as the location of the primary causes of human experience and personhood in the interiors of individuals. On this definition, strong versions of genetic determinism, biophysical reductionism, and cognitivism all may be understood as variants of psychologism.

reductionism in psychological science by describing and demonstrating the reality of the sociocultural and psychological participation of persons within the reality of their historically established sociocultural contexts. Of course, the historical, sociocultural reality of persons is saturated and integrated with biophysical reality. But, this biophysical reality is seldom questioned. In contrast, the reality of the historical, sociocultural components of the world frequently is missed, questioned, or even dismissed by many psychologists and analytic philosophers. Persons are simultaneously biophysically embodied and socioculturally embedded actors. We ought take our embeddedness as seriously as we take our embodiment.

A detailed account of the theoretical frameworks that underlie my remarks here may be found in a trilogy of books I wrote with Jeff Sugarman and others (1999, 2003, 2010). These works synthesize and extend in modest ways ideas and perspectives such as those articulated much earlier by Lev Vygotsky, George Herbert Mead, and to some extent Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and several other cultural historical theorists, pragmatists, hermeneuts, and philosophical anthropologists. More recently, related perspectives have been championed by Ed Sampson, Rom Harré, John Shotter, Phil Cushman, Michael Westerman, Steve Yanchar, Anna Stetsenko, Mark Bickhard, Suzanne Kirschner, Blaine Fowers, Frank Richardson, Brent Slife, James Lamiell, and Mark Freeman, among others.

I begin with a straight-forward discussion of historical sociocultural reality, which is so obvious and omnipresent that it seems to have been overlooked by many psychologists who have focused on individuals and their interiors in a surprisingly decontextualized way. I then demonstrate and illustrate the importance of taking sociocultural reality seriously if we want to understand persons or anything important about them. I do this with a brief dual biographical case study of the lives and works of Carl Rogers and B. F. Skinner, as these relate to understandings and practices of freedom and control. Where standard psychological paradigms (such as the 'Big Five' personality theory and traditional demarcations of psychological life into the tripartite of cognition-affect-volition) are strangely devoid of the concrete particulars of sociocultural reality, the case example I employ is replete with such particulars. I have chosen this plan for my essay because I now believe that theoretical and philosophical argument alone will never succeed in helping psychologists become more attuned to the historical sociocultural constitution of persons as agentive beings within their biophysical and sociocultural contexts. What I hope to do here is much more modest than philosophical theorizing, but hopefully more effective for my purposes. Here, I focus on the very real and particular lives of persons as embodied, embedded, interactive, and emergent within their worldly contexts.

1. A brief consideration of sociocultural, psychological reality

I write this essay in my home office, presumably alone but actually embedded in artifacts and practices I have accumulated and participated within throughout my life. As I write, I sometimes look around the library that surrounds me, containing many works that have influenced my personal and intellectual development—works in which I immersed myself in the long process of becoming me, the person I am, with the thoughts and ideas I have and recognize as my own. Just as basic to who I am, what I do, and how I do it are many photographs of and memorabilia related to my family, hobbies, and career, including a rather awful, supposedly antique rocking chair that belonged to my great grandmother. More immediately, on the desk at which I sit and write, are a few works related directly to what I am trying to formulate at this moment, a couple of possible outlines for what I want to say, one initially drafted in a pub conversing with a good friend and colleague, and

the old and newly fashioned technical tools I use to write and compose my thoughts. Not only are all these materials objectively and immediately observable, but just as important to their reality, is their functionality. Collectively, they are not merely a passive background surrounding my activity. Not at all. These artifacts and aids are much more like a prosthetic web that envelops and contains my writing, an extension and source of my thoughts, ideas, imaginings, and actions. They actively support my practices of production—those methods I employ to do what I do, some of which I can articulate readily, but some that I only can sense as vaguely familiar, reassuring, and when things go well, "right."

What is most directly relevant to my present purposes about the context in, and with, which I write is that little of it is *natural*, in any pure sense of this concept. None of this, let alone the home, neighborhood, province, and country in which my office resides is what analytically inclined philosophers might refer to as "natural kinds." My desk and its furnishings, my library, memorabilia, tools, notes, plans, and my activity itself all are "made." They all are material, objective, and practical inventions of my immediate and historical sociocultural situation and my life-long participation in that constantly unfolding context. Indeed, I myself, the person I am (which includes my projects, ambitions, plans, and intentions) is part of, both structurally and functionally embedded and constituted within, this context. A moment's thought about your own present circumstances and activity likely will produce a similar result should you wish to pursue a similar line of observation, reflection, and articulation.

So, given all this, it is more than passing strange that so much published work in psychology fails to treat the social psychological person materially and objectively interacting within her worldly context as the very real centerpiece of inquiry. Instead, we are told directly and indirectly, over and over, that the social and the cultural are ephemeral—mere inventions, the purported existence of which is nothing more than solipsistic subjectivity and none of which even begins to penetrate to those foundational bits and pieces, those "givens," that ultimately determine everything and everyone. I submit that this is a most peculiar, even risible, way to think about persons and their historical, material sociocultural contexts. It leads not only to ignoring obvious and immediate situations and participatory practices as objectively constitutive of the psychological lives and activities of persons, but it also results in an unfortunate denial or diminution of the objective, readily observable facts of our social psychological activity itself.

Returning for a moment to my current activity in my office, careful observation reveals that my activity, as I work and write, is far from "all in my head." When things are flowing, my fingers move continuously through the keys of my laptop. When the flow of what I want to say dissipates or hits a snag, my fingers slow and stop, my face twists and grimaces, I might lean back in my chair, even get up and walk about my office, perhaps searching for, pulling out, and flipping through a particular volume, frequently registering satisfaction or the lack thereof as I find or fail to find that for which I am searching. My indecision manifests as I actively try to decide on a relevant source—shaking my head, successively side to side and then top to bottom, while replacing one book and reaching for another, only moments later to reverse both my head nods and the books, replacing the one previously selected with the one previously abandoned. Occasionally, my frustration is a deep sigh accompanied with a thump of my hand on the surface of my desk. At other times, a smile creeps across my face and my fingers race in confidence. It is not difficult to read much of my psychology in my activity. This is in no way to promote a reductive behaviorism, but simply to recognize that our psychological experiences are embodied and embedded. By carefully observing persons as they act within contexts, it is possible to extract much of their

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