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978-1-107-01808-2 - The Psychology of Personhood: Philosophical, Historical,
Social-Developmental, and Narrative Perspectives

Edited by Jack Martin and Mark H. Bickhard

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1 Introducing persons and the psychology of personhood

Jack Martin and Mark H. Bickhard

This book is about persons. Given what most of us think about when we hear the word “psychology,” it is surprising that so much disciplinary psychology over the past 100 to 150 years has had relatively little to say about persons and their lives. Fortunately, this state of affairs has begun to change very rapidly. The purpose of this book is to introduce the seemingly new, yet in some ways long-standing, study of persons in psychology. At this time, the psychology of personhood is being resurrected and transformed through the philosophical, historical, social-developmental, and narrative inquiries of a number of psychologists. What unites these recent developments is their commitment to a psychology of personhood that emphasizes the holistic interactivity of persons within the biophysical and socio-cultural world. The focus of contemporary psychology of personhood is holistic, in the sense that it eschews attempts to reduce persons to their mental lives, behaviors, and/or neurophysiological, biological particulars and parts. It also focuses on the everyday experiences and lives of ordinary people, rather than on exceptional individuals or those afflicted by various pathologies. This book is a collective product of the ideas and contributions of a number of contemporary psychologists who have established reputations for conducting philosophical, historical, social-developmental, and narrative inquiries into what it is to be a person in the usual sense of that term, a sense that is implicit in our ordinary language.

The concept of a person

Although an understanding of personhood is implicit in our everyday linguistic and relational practices, a more explicitly conceptual consideration of personhood is necessary for our purposes. The concept of a person is applicable to human beings understood as social beings who are members of a moral community. Persons are biological in so

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Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Jack Martin and Mark H. Bickhard*

far as they are embodied, but their embodiment is enacted within a world that is simultaneously both biophysical and socio-cultural. It is the interactivity of persons within the biophysical and socio-cultural world that is responsible, both evolutionarily and developmentally, for their possession of a distinctive range of powers. These powers constitute a suite of social, psychological capabilities, including the use of language, the creation of culture, self-consciousness, and self-understanding, an agency that includes intentionality and two-way volitional control (to act or refrain from acting), a reasoning intelligence, a moral concern, the ability to take and integrate different perspectives, and the experience of psychological time in which past experiences interact with current circumstances and anticipated futures to afford alternative possibilities for thinking and acting. Persons also may be described in terms of their personalities (unique combinations of temperament and action tendencies), identities (anchored by physical characteristics, social positioning and circumstances, and autobiographical recollections, reflections, and projects), and character (as judged by their conduct and circumstances, using relevant moral and rational criteria of their community). Because of their abilities to internalize norms of conduct, take the perspectives of particular others and social groups, and reason, persons are answerable for their deeds. Thus, the concept of a person has historically been salient in religious, political, legal, and educational contexts, practices, and institutions.

Unlike the members of other animal species, persons are not understood only in terms of their corporeal and adaptive attributes and capacities, but also in terms of their own self interpretations and ascriptions. Because various aspects of persons include or refer to biophysical characteristics, socio-cultural positionings, norms, and self-interpretations, the concept of a person applies across the physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Personhood is a necessarily interdisciplinary subject. Moreover, the concept of the person is an irreducibly holistic one. An adequate psychology of personhood cannot focus on cognitive, biological, social, or cultural aspects of persons in isolation, but must capture all of these dimensions as they have interacted, evolved, and developed over historical, social, and biographical time, and as they continue to interact in the present. To understand persons as the unique biological-cultural hybrids that they are, characterized by the suite of social, psychological, rational, and moral capabilities and concerns described above, requires a focus on their holistic interactivity within the biophysical and socio-cultural world. Perhaps it is the daunting nature of this challenge that explains what only can be

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introducing persons and the psychology of personhood

3

regarded as the peculiar history of personhood within the discipline of psychology.¹

Personhood and psychology

At different stages in its history as a distinctive discipline, psychology has been defined as the study of mind, the study of behavior, or the study of cognitive processes and structures. Although not often stated explicitly, and despite protracted excursions into comparative psychological experimentation with other animals and attempts to create artificial, machine intelligence, psychology clearly aims to understand human beings as persons. This aspiration is most obviously evident in the professional arm of disciplinary psychology, where educational, consulting, business, health care, and clinical applications of psychology have consistently targeted individuals understood as persons. Consequently, it is perplexing that relatively little attention within the history of disciplinary psychology has been devoted explicitly to conceptualizing persons and considering the proper manner of their study. The scant and infrequent attention given to such seemingly pivotal matters by most psychologists is even more surprising in recognition of the considerable interest in personhood evident during the first two decades following psychology's emergence as a distinctive discipline.

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century, several well-known psychologists endorsed the study of persons within their worldly contexts. William James, James Mark Baldwin, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Mary Whiton Calkins, William Stern, Pierre Janet, Lev Vygotsky, Heinz Werner, and Wilhelm Wundt (especially in his later years) all were concerned with the holistic activity and functioning of persons as uniquely capable psychological beings within their social contexts.² However, it was not long before the more speculative, philosophical, moral, and socio-cultural aspects of the work of these giants of the new discipline were expunged or simply overlooked, as the rapidly developing discipline and its adherents

¹ Given that the study of the person is of necessity an interdisciplinary project, the fact that most of the contributors to this volume are psychologists might seem inconsistent with this required interdisciplinarity. However, the focus of this book is "the psychology of personhood," and the contributing authors have been selected because they are distinguished psychologists or philosophers who have expertise in the disciplines of philosophy, history, and/or social, developmental, and narrative studies.

² J. Valsiner and R. van der Veer, *The Social Mind: Construction of the Idea* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Jack Martin and Mark H. Bickhard*

moved quickly to establish the scientific standing of psychology in ways that would clearly distinguish it from other academic disciplines such as mental philosophy, and from a host of dubious practices such as phrenology, physiognomy, mesmerism, spiritualism, and mental healing.³ As a science and scientifically based profession, psychology quickly adopted and adapted standards and practices of objectivity, together with techniques of measurement and experimentation, that it borrowed from more established sciences like physics, chemistry, biology, and physiology, frequently without any particularly clear understanding of desired linkages between the subject matters and methods of inquiry of these other sciences.⁴ In consequence, the first psychological laboratories tended to focus their resources and energies on the study of components of the mental lives of persons in isolation from the contexts in which persons lived.

Thus, the first wave of scientific psychology was typified by attempts to isolate and study what were considered to be the basic components or elements of consciousness, such as sensations and feelings, with some carefully circumscribed theorizing about how these psychic elements might be organized, analyzed, and/or altered by the mind to yield experiences, emotions, and ideas. Methods such as reaction times and “just noticeable differences” were borrowed from psychophysics with the aim of mathematizing experimental results in ways intended to parallel the objectivity and precision of more established, successful sciences. How exactly such methods and results were to support the applications of the first professional psychologists was mostly ignored, it being deemed sufficient to parade such interventions under the general banner of scientific knowledge and progress. Consequently, it was not long until most psychologists were engaged in activities that could be pursued in the almost complete absence of conceptions of personhood. In fact, setting aside such conceptions and considerations avoided perceptions of the vast gap between early scientific psychology and any credible understanding of the functioning of persons in their everyday lives – a strategy, intended or not, that has continued to manifest in different guises throughout the entire history of psychological science and practice.⁵

The struggles of disciplinary, scientific, and professional psychology to come to grips with its subject matter soon became acutely evident, as experimentation to discern the basic elements of consciousness and

³ L. T. Benjamin, Jr., *A Brief History of Modern Psychology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

⁴ C. D. Green, M. Shore, and T. Teo, *The Transformation of Psychology: Influences of 19th-century Philosophy, Technology, and Natural Science* (Washington, DC: APA Books, 2004).

⁵ K. Danziger, *Naming the Mind: How Psychology Found its Language* (London: Sage, 1997).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

processes that could be merged into higher-order thoughts and feelings began to flounder methodologically, theoretically, and practically. Methods of introspection only could be applied to the most basic of sensations without introducing levels of inference that proved to be methodologically intractable in terms of producing comparable and consistent results across different laboratories. Different theories of the compounding of these basic elements into the cognitive and affective experiences of everyday life proliferated without any means of adjudication and applications of psychology far out-stripped any credible empirical basis in the psychological science of the day.

In response, psychology and psychologists shifted focus, away from the basic structures of consciousness to the study of the behaviors of humans and other animals in carefully controlled laboratory contexts. This shift in subject matter from structures of consciousness to functions of behavior often is described as the first revolution in the modern science of psychology. However, it also was a necessary shift in subject matter in response to the lack of progress being achieved by an earlier generation of mentalistic psychologists. And, once again, in a rush to establish the scientific viability of this new science of behavior, standards of objectivity and methodological procedures borrowed from more mature sciences helped to ensure that the latest version of psychological science would steer mostly clear of the everyday experiences and actions of persons in those social, cultural contexts in which they lived and worked.

However, behaviorism did represent certain advances in establishing the possible relevance of psychology to personhood. Despite ignoring most of the obvious differences between human beings and cats, dogs, or rats, the behaviorists did study the holistic activity of animals in carefully controlled environments, and were concerned with how the activity of the animals in these contexts resulted in the learning (or, at least, the habituation) of those various patterns of behavior that were conditioned and reinforced by the experimenters. Additionally, these results did have a direct relevance to the applications of professional behavioral psychologists who began to employ techniques of behavior modification in schools, workplaces, and other social institutions, including prisons and hospitals. Of course, in order to conduct their studies in ways that yielded replicable results, the behaviorists had to greatly restrict the environments within which their research subjects (human and non-human) acted. Consequently, not only was the activity of research subjects restricted to simple behaviors that could be studied and counted objectively, but the contexts within which such behaviors were produced were purposefully sterile, being stripped of any objects other than those used to manipulate the particular behaviors of interest to the experimenters.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Jack Martin and Mark H. Bickhard*

Behavioral studies in social psychology that examined the responses of human subjects were no exception.⁶ The environments studied were social only in the sense that they included a small number of carefully scripted interactions between research participants and a total stranger or small number of strangers (the experimenter and confederates of the experimenter). Thus, such contexts were minimally, proximately, and simplistically social. They included almost nothing of the broader social, historical, or cultural dimensions, processes, artifacts, practices, or institutions that populate and influence the lives of persons as they do their banking, entertain guests, or struggle with complex family and work situations and dilemmas. Nonetheless, despite its failure to come to grips with the social, cultural embeddedness of persons, and despite almost a complete absence of conceptual focus on persons and their circumstances, behaviorism, as a framework for psychological inquiry, succeeded in achieving a paradigmatic, near consensus among most psychologists by the early 1950s, before the early stirrings of contemporary cognitive psychology, and its subsequent ascendancy during the second half of the twentieth century.

Before considering cognitive psychology's treatment of persons and personhood, it is important not to neglect the development of psychometric methods and personality psychology from the 1920s to the 1950s and beyond. Despite being on the periphery of mainstream behaviorism, the combination of personality theorizing and psychometric methodologies served to replace the earlier focus of psychologists like James, Stern, and Janet on the interactivity of persons in historical, social, cultural, and developmental contexts, with an understanding of persons as bearers or possessors of certain inner personality traits that could be measured by various psychological instruments (mostly paper-and-pencil questionnaires on which subjects self-reported). Although heralded, and still practiced, as the scientific psychology of personality, such an approach effectively reduces personality understood as a combination of the character and action tendencies of persons to personality as ascertained from aggregates of subjects' self-reported ratings on psychologists' carefully prepared questionnaires – ratings that typically are made at a considerable physical, social, and psychological remove from the interactive lives of the persons who make the ratings.⁷ Of equal, if not greater,

⁶ K. Danziger, Making social psychology experimental: A conceptual history, 1920–1970. *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 34 (2000) 329–347.

⁷ See, for example, Danziger, *Naming the Mind*, S. Greer, Is there a “self” in self research? Or, how measuring the self made it disappear. *Social Practice/Psychological Theorizing* 1 (2007) 51–68, and I. A. M. Nicholson, *Inventing Personality: Gordon Allport*

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conceptual significance with respect to personhood is the highly debatable understanding that such personality assessments actually measure personality as an inner possession (set of personality traits) of individuals. This understanding assumes that most of the determining sources of one's personhood reside in deeply interior psychological structures and processes within individuals that nonetheless can be unproblematically accessed, "observed," and reported by the individuals themselves, using methods and item formats that psychometricians and personality psychologists borrowed initially from public opinion polls in the US. To complicate matters even further, applications of psychometric, personality psychology came to trade more and more on the logically dubious idea that it was possible to extract knowledge of the personalities of individuals from studies of differences between groups of individuals on traits such as extroversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness.

With the dawn of cognitive psychology, it seemed possible that psychology's return to the study of mental or cognitive structures and processes – albeit with newly minted computational models and neurophysiological theories – might afford an opening for the study of important aspects of personhood such as reasoned and intentional action, moral concern, self-consciousness, self-understanding, and first-person experience, even if the integrated study of the embodied, situated interactivity of persons in full historical, socio-cultural context was not immediately in the cards. After more than fifty years into psychology's so-called second revolution (the first being the shift from mentalism to behaviorism), the cognitivist reign certainly differs from the behaviorism that preceded it, with respect to a proliferation of research and applications in areas related to personhood such as self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-regulation, all rendered in the language of inner cognitive processes and structures. However, a closer look at psychological theory and research in these areas reveals little conceptual sophistication concerning what the self is and how exactly it relates to conceptions of persons as much more than their psychological interiors.⁸ Moreover, cognitive psychology has tended to adopt conceptions of human beings as information processing machines or neural networks that have largely reduced persons to the inner workings of metaphorical processes of computation (e.g., encoding, storage, retrieval, and application) or patterns of cerebral activity (e.g., activation, excitation, and inhibition in the cortex and elsewhere,

and the Science of Selfhood (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Books, 2003).

⁸ R. Harré, *Cognitive Science: A Philosophical Introduction* (London: Sage, 2002).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Jack Martin and Mark H. Bickhard*

discernible through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRIs) and other imaging and recording techniques). It now is not unusual to read and listen to a new generation of cognitive neuroscientists attributing the thoughts, experiences, and actions of persons to different areas of their brains, and forgetting that it is persons interactive within the biophysical and socio-cultural world who make decisions, exercise self-control, or feel good about themselves.⁹ Obviously, bodies are required for the worldly activity of persons. However, so too are interactivity within social, cultural practices and experiential biographical histories, neither of which is reducible to the inner workings of our brains and/or cognitive, computational systems (whatever the ontological status of the latter might be).

In sum, the history of disciplinary psychology is a history of successive attempts to reduce persons – first, to basic operations and structures of their minds understood in mentalistic, componential terms, then to their behaviors as studied mostly in highly restricted micro-environments, and finally to internal cognitive, computational, and neurophysiological structures, processes, and patterns of activation. In addition, since the early years of the twentieth century, various attempts have been made to construct a psychological science of personality that makes extensive use of psychometric measures and statistical techniques that utilize self-report ratings of individuals concerning their understandings and evaluations of themselves in ways that lend themselves to interpreting such ratings as scientifically valid data about personality traits such as extroversion and neuroticism, and social-psychological attributes such as self-concept, self-regulation, and personal identity. One of the things that all of these reductive strategies share is an attempt to grossly simplify the complex lives of persons understood as embodied, rational, and moral agents interactive within evolutionary and developmental trajectories that include histories of constantly unfolding socio-cultural and biographical traditions, practices, artifacts, and identifications. Recognizing the constancy of this basic reductionism across shifts in the focus and methods of psychological science and professional practice over time does not mean that disciplinary psychology as practiced thus far is entirely irrelevant with respect to understanding persons, nor does it mean that personhood has been entirely ignored by all psychologists. However, it certainly does imply that most mainstream psychological theory, research, and practice are not optimally targeted at informing our understanding of ourselves as persons.

⁹ M. R. Bennett and P. M. S. Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Nonetheless, the historical record is not all bad news for a credible psychology of personhood. As already mentioned, there was an impressive first wave of what might be considered a promising psychology of personhood during the founding years of disciplinary psychology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Additionally, despite the subsequent succession of highly popular, but mostly reductive systems of psychological science – from mentalism to behaviorism to cognitivism – small pockets of psychologists, who pursued less reductive approaches to psychological inquiry and practice, continued to understand and study persons in more holistic, contextualized, and integrative ways. Indeed, the ideas of the first generation of psychologists of personhood (i.e., James, Dewey, the later Wundt, Janet, Mead, Vygotsky, Stern, and others) continued to garner small numbers of supporters and advocates throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.¹⁰ Within American psychology, examples included Gestalt psychology (as imported from Germany before and during the second world war), post-war humanistic psychology (including phenomenological, existential, and hermeneutic approaches to the study of persons), more social forms of psychoanalytically informed psychology (especially as developed by Adler, Sullivan, and their colleagues), and a growing wave of social, historical, and cultural psychology that belatedly hit the US and Canada in the late 1960s, stimulated by the works of Lev Vygotsky and other Russian psychologists.

In addition, several prominent personality psychologists who had become enamored of more robustly holistic conceptions of persons and who had begun to adopt biographical and narrative methods for understanding persons and their lives began to meet together on a regular basis under the banner of “personology,” a term linked to the ideas of earlier personality theorists (like Henry Murray and Gordon Allport, and to an even longer-standing, interdisciplinary commitment to the understanding of persons) who envisioned a personality psychology that went well beyond personality assessments alone.¹¹ Moreover, in some of psychology’s most popular subdivisions like developmental psychology (influenced by the activity and interactivity foci of Baldwin, Werner, Piaget, and others) concern for the holistic activity of persons in social, developmental context always had resisted the more excessive forms of behaviorism and cognitivism that achieved such wide-spread popularity at different times in the history of mainstream psychology.

¹⁰ Valsiner and van der Veer, *The Social Mind*.

¹¹ I. E. Alexander, *Personology: Method and Content in Personality Assessment and Psychobiography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

Cambridge University Press

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Social-Developmental, and Narrative Perspectives

Edited by Jack Martin and Mark H. Bickhard

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Jack Martin and Mark H. Bickhard*

Consequently, with the development of more theoretically informed discourses (e.g., social constructionism, discursive psychology, neoconstructivism) in psychology during the last two decades of the twentieth century and into the first decades of the twenty-first century, the stage was set for a revival, or second wave of the psychology of personhood, one which attempts to use theoretical and historical frameworks, and methods of qualitative, narrative inquiry, and social-developmental theorizing to conceptualize and study persons in holistic, contextualized ways as interactive, communal agents. However, although this new wave of psychological focus and inquiry has now been underway for at least twenty years, it is only recently that a growing number of psychologists who have participated in this second wave of the psychology of personhood have begun to identify themselves explicitly as psychologists of personhood, and to write directly about personhood and the challenges and opportunities it poses for disciplinary psychology. Consequently, the time is right for a volume that explores and examines the psychology of personhood, with an emphasis on philosophical, historical, social-developmental, and narrative dimensions of this important, and increasingly, if somewhat belatedly, recognized area of psychological scholarship.

The psychology of personhood: contents and themes

This book is organized into four parts to reflect the salience of philosophical, historical, social-developmental, and narrative thinking and inquiry in the contemporary psychology of personhood. This organization reflects the major dimensions of recent work in the psychology of personhood as described above. In addition, the ordering of these four parts introduces conceptual and broader philosophical concerns with respect to personhood, before persons are considered in historical and social-developmental contexts within which they are constituted as the unique beings that they are. Ending with narrative perspectives in the psychology of personhood provides more concrete illustrations of the ways in which a psychology of personhood can enhance our general understanding of the nature of persons and their lives, and enrich our particular understanding of specific persons, their circumstances, and their accomplishments.

All of our authors strongly reject the notion of persons as encapsulated individuals that has dominated disciplinary psychology from its beginnings. Their positive proposals exploring this relatively new theoretical space, however, are at times divergent. Consequently, this volume by no means offers a unified understanding of the person that is devoid of disagreements and uncertainties concerning the limits and nature of our