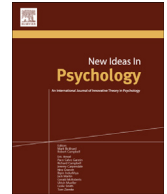




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Conceptual and pedagogical challenges in understanding the whole person

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ABSTRACT

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The article introduces the special issues addressing Eric Johnson's account of Form Psychology, which provides a conceptual method to scientifically study the whole person. Form Psychology is presented as a theoretically significant proposal that integrates multiple conceptualizations of the whole person. The pedagogical value of such an understanding is also emphasized as undergraduate psychology students hold strong intuitions that the person is an integrated whole rather than a set of distinct systems.

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Johnson's (2013) "Mapping the Field of the Whole Human: Towards a Form Psychology" is reprinted in this special issue of *New Ideas in Psychology* as the target paper along with three responses from Rom Harré, Jack Martin, and Mark Freeman. The target and response papers address how best to scientifically study the whole person, not just the person's underlying neurological processes, behavioral systems, or cognitive representations and operations. The whole person is defined as biologically embodied and inextricably situated in and interacting with the physical, social, and cultural milieu (Martin & Bickhard, 2013). Johnson analyzes the status of challenges facing the study of the whole person in psychology, reviews interdisciplinary approaches to the study of whole persons from psychology, humanities, philosophy, and religion, and provides a theoretical framework for integrating the approaches. Each of the commentators picks up on key elements of the analysis, including the scope and limits in Johnson's concept of wholeness, the adequacy of his solution for creating a science of the whole person, and the limits in the forms of analysis he considers. In the final paper, Johnson responds to these critiques using the very model of Form Psychology he offers as a metasystem to

integrate the multiple perspectives, revealing the strengths and limits of the approach.

A focus on the whole person is of interest not only to scholars but also to students first encountering the discipline. There are an estimated 1.5 million students in the U.S. enrolled in introductory psychology classes each year (APA, 2014) and countless more in other countries. They come into class with the strong expectation that they will learn about the whole person – the entity who negotiates the world consciously, agentively, morally, and rationally. Instead, they get a person who is sliced and diced into separate "pieces" in textbook chapters addressing biological, developmental, cognitive, social, and personality systems (to name a few). These chapters then become classes in the undergraduate curriculum. Students, like scholars, need help in putting the "Humpty Dumpty" person back together again. In these introductory remarks for this special issue, I highlight not only the theoretical challenges of and proposed solutions for crafting a discipline that embraces the whole person, but also its pedagogical implications for students learning the discipline.

As evidence that students, like theorists, see the whole person as central to psychology, I have explored whether they are careful to distinguish wholes and parts as they apply to persons. As Harré (2012, p. 333) notes, "a person can be said to be reflecting on a problem, but it is a

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conceptual error to say that that person's left frontal lobe is reflecting on a problem." I assessed whether introductory psychology students demonstrate any tendency to confuse a person with his or her brain by presenting them with variations of the following story:

Imagine meeting someone, we will call him Sam. Sam is a very special person who can do remarkable things. One thing he can do is to remove a piece of his skull and point to his brain. Pretty impressive feat, don't you think? He is pointing to it now, but what is it he is pointing to? Is Sam pointing to (a) himself, (b) a part of himself, (c) a part of his body?

The variations in the story of Sam and his brain continued, placing the brain and the rest of the body in separate locations but continuing to ask the same question – whether Sam's brain is Sam, a part of Sam, or a part of Sam's body. Two-thirds of the introductory psychology students recognized brains as a part of people's bodies (option c) and did so in the same proportion for each of the different variations of the story and overall. Moreover, students with advanced standing in the discipline produced almost exactly the same pattern of responses, suggesting that students' fundamental insight regarding the whole person is retained even after completing classes in the undergraduate curriculum. From when they first enter the classroom to their graduation day, most psychology students recognize the value and significance of considering the whole person as distinct from the person's component parts and systems.

Eric Johnson's target paper highlights the conceptual and methodological resistance afforded by traditional ways of applying science to psychology which have historically worked against the study of the whole person. The reductionist tendencies and ontological skittishness of psychological science have historically conspired against the growth of the study of the whole person by privileging narrowly operationalized concepts and experimental and quantitative methods. The result was to eschew more intuitive, philosophical, and religious conceptions of personhood and the use of multiple methods to study the whole person. As regular readers of the journal know well, there are suspicions held by scholars (some of whom contributed to the special issue) that science can sometimes obfuscate and make opaque rather than clarify and secure the foundation for understanding personhood. Johnson's critique is not a prelude to a general critique of science itself or even of psychological science, but it is a plea to consider adopting a critically reflective stance on the strengths and limits of the application of science to psychology.

In key ways, an uncritical and traditional way of applying science to psychology is the presentation students receive in the first few weeks of their introductory psychology class. Across a variety of textbooks, students are exposed to the scientific foundation of the discipline as the means to rescue them from the influence of so-called misunderstandings or misconceptions about people and their behavior. These "misinterpretations" are presented as arising from students' own naïve intuitions about the whole person, springing from cultural assumptions, commonsense theories, and religious doctrines. There is

little analysis or defense of the argument that science rescues students from distortions arising from other sources and systems of knowing persons. Although textbooks may present some of the challenges of applying science to psychology due to the variability, reactivity, and complexity of persons, there is no critical reflection on the implications and consequences of doing so. It is as if the appropriateness of applying science to psychology this way is so self-evident that it is considered *uncontroversial*.

The uncontroversial nature of the application of science to the study of psychology in general and to persons in particular is the source of some scrutiny by Johnson. His solution to traditional psychological science's conceptual and methodological resistance to the study of the whole person is to embrace a diversity of coexisting approaches. This *pluriform* approach is analogized as an organization of multiple thematic maps of the same terrain, social roles for the same person, or photographs of the same object which provides a complete account of the multiple approaches. The pluriform solution is challenged by some commentators for going too far in its embrace of diversity (Martin and Harré), notably more religious forms, and by others for not going far enough (Freeman).

Such a critical attempt at meaningful integration of the study of the whole person is generally unavailable to the 90,000 psychology majors in the U.S. who graduate with an undergraduate degree each year. The undergraduate psychology curriculum emphasizes research with a goal of making the students "scientists of mind" (Brewer et al., 1993) who can apply their newfound psychological literacy to improve their own lives and those of others (APA, 2013). This curricular outward-looking goal is also accepted without much more than a moment's reflection on whether psychological science does anything other than present a clear and precise, valid and reliable, trustworthy and justifiable account of persons.

This uncontroversial presentation of psychological science and anchoring it as a central goal of undergraduate education is embodied in Stanovich's (2013) *How to think Straight about Psychology*, a popular often-required text in undergraduate and graduate psychology courses. The book is a polemic designed to arm students with arguments to counter those who have doubts about whether there is something lesser about psychology as a science than physics, chemistry or biology. The present special issue adopts the title *How to Think Critically about Psychology* as a play on and challenge to Stanovich's book. It does so because helping students to "straighten" their thinking about psychology seems to be curiously ineffective.

Students seem to be aware of the limits of traditional application of science to the discipline presented by Johnson and his critics. The traditional application of science to persons, with its reductionist tendencies and skittish ontology, is greeted with skepticism by the students to whom the argument is relentlessly pitched. There are at best modest increases with exposure to the discipline of conceiving of psychology as a science (Amsel, Baird, & Ashley, 2011). Substantial discrepancies exist between psychology instructors and their students, even those who are majors in the discipline, in accepting the discipline as a science (Holmes, 2014). Moreover, and more to the point,

the students themselves—even students with advanced standing—are well aware that their instructors are more enamored than they are with the application of science to the discipline (Amsel, Ashley, Baird, & Johnson, 2014; Amsel et al., 2009). Students also appear to retain beliefs in dualism (Stanovich, 1989) and free will (Monroe & Malle, 2010; Rakos, Steyer, Skala, & Slane, 2008), despite these positions often being seen as incompatible with the discipline's scientific foundation.

Psychology students are exposed to a steady stream of science being applied uncontroversially to the study of persons. Yet they retain a view of the value of personhood and remain skeptical about the science of the discipline in addressing it. Rather than ignorant or naïve, students are critical in holding off an enthusiastic embrace of a claim about the science of the discipline accounting for all relevant phenomena of the discipline without sufficient defense. It is a pity that the students who may be the most skeptical are those who leave psychology to pursue majors in other disciplines (Holmes, 2014). One cannot help think of the talent lost to the discipline for lack of inviting them to critically discuss just how science can be applied to the study of the whole person. Yes, students must learn the science of the discipline, but opening up the discussion about its limits in the manner presented in the pages of this special issue may encourage students to not only apply their psychological literacy to the world but also back onto the discipline itself.

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