

Two Conceptual Systems for Making Sense of the Individual Person in Psychology

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This paper examines two contrasting approaches to conceptualizing the person in psychology. In the causal-mechanical approach, folk psychological concepts are assumed to be physical objects, mechanisms or causal processes that operate in and around the human organism. The second approach, social-constructionism, treats the individual as a sign produced through certain forms of material-discursive activity. These two approaches are often portrayed as in opposition to one another. However, if the conceptual confusion that frequently plagues them is eliminated, they have potential to be integrated into a broad theoretical system in which the social constructionist and mainstream cognitivist approaches to the study of the person are coherently related. Once this is done, the issue of relating the person and the society is transformed into the issue of determining whether to relate particular psychological phenomena to the individual organism, or to the consensually constructed discursive world.

There are different ways that the individual person can be conceptualized within psychological research. The choice of conceptualization has important consequences for how the person can be understood to relate to the environment and its socio-cultural dimensions, as well as determining the types of research questions that are worth asking within psychology.

Rather than attempting to find a single appropriate way to understand the person, a more promising approach may be to attempt to get a sense of the diversity of ways that the person, broadly construed, may be understood, and to identify the strengths of these disparate approaches. This paper describes two very different ways of conceptualizing the person: a causal-mechanical approach and a social constructionist approach. These are very different conceptualizations. Rather than viewing these disparate approaches as symptomatic of a fracturing of the theoretical basis of psychology, this article argues that they can be coherently related to one another within a shared theoretical framework—something which requires some conceptual clarification work.

Article Outline

This paper begins with a description of the causal-mechanical approach to investigating the person and psychological phenomena. This approach is then assessed in terms of its strengths and weaknesses. Next, an alternative conceptualization of the individual person as a social construction is presented and evaluated. The paper concludes with a description

of how these two concepts of the person are fundamentally distinct, yet possible to relate coherently within a shared theoretical system.

THE CAUSAL-MECHANICAL APPROACH

The causal-mechanical approach treats the person, either implicitly or explicitly, as a physical system that can be understood as a set of discrete structures and mechanisms and/or modeled in terms of causal processes. While the biological study of the person is a clear example of this approach, the causal-mechanical approach is also used to investigate psychological constructs such as intelligence, emotions (e.g., anger), personality, knowledge, or beliefs. The causal-mechanical approach does not include any and all investigations of the previously mentioned topics, just those which treat them—implicitly or explicitly—as physical structures or mechanisms (i.e., empirical realities) located within the individual organism. This can be illustrated with the example of intelligence, which shows both the general character of the causal-mechanical approach, as well as the issues that arise when it is used as a framework for understanding psychological (rather than biological) constructs.

Investigation of Intelligence as a Case Study for the Causal-Mechanical Approach:

In the causal-mechanical approach, intelligence is assumed to be a natural object—something that is a part of the observer-independent world. It is assumed that there is something that corresponds roughly to our concept of intelligence that exists in the organism, independent of our ideas about it. The assumption that psychological phenomena such as intelligence are natural objects is implicit in familiar questions such as ‘but how intelligent is the person *really?*’ or ‘Is intelligence a single thing, or are there multiple intelligences?’

Measurement and the Causal-Mechanical Approach:

The assumption about the natural-object status of psychological constructs in the causal-mechanical approach leads to attempts to measure these constructs. The rationale for this is as follows: If phenomena such as intelligence (or any other psychological construct) are somehow constituted in the discourse-independent world, then it follows that they must be able to be detected somehow. If they can be detected, they can be learned about, and the knowledge about them that is elaborated is a function of how accurate the methods of detection are. In this way, the practice of measurement becomes relevant to investigation of intelligence and similar topics.

There are a multitude of measures or tests of psychological constructs, from intelligence, conceptual knowledge and personality, to more specialized or obscure constructs used by a smaller number of researchers. The discourse that surrounds these measures further corroborates the idea that the constructs are natural objects. This is specifically apparent with the issue of validity. Tests or instruments that are intended to measure a construct, e.g., intelligence, are talked about in terms of whether or not, or the extent to which they provide a valid way to measure that construct. The possibility of more or less accurately

measuring something implies the idea that the ‘something’ in question exists apart from the device used to measure it. Therefore, if we can talk about how well a test measures intelligence, then we are assuming that intelligence exists in some form apart from the test.

Of course, it might be argued that there are many different types of intelligence (Gardner, 1983), or that what constitutes intelligence changes depending on the historical context. This is not incompatible with the causal-mechanical approach. While we may use the same label—*intelligence*—to describe a wide variety of different things (intelligences), this does not mean that these various forms of intelligence are not themselves individually real, albeit different things. In fact, part of the impetus for Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences was the observation that brain damage appeared to impact certain forms of intelligence while leaving others intact (Gardner, 1983).

If psychological constructs like intelligence have an extra-discursive existence, it follows that they are, in some way and at some level, mechanisms or organizational characteristics of the human organism. Therefore, the goal of investigations of these constructs ought to be a description of the appropriate part of the organism and its environmental extensions. In some cases, this is acknowledged. For instance, Chomsky (1988) writes: “when we speak of the mind we are speaking at some level of abstraction of yet unknown physical mechanisms of the brain” (p. 7). An important question, addressed later in this paper, is how psychological constructs, such as intelligence, personality, memory, etc., could possibly be abstractions of physical processes. What would the move from abstract, mentalistic descriptions to concrete physical descriptions look like? How can it occur?

Causal Investigations in Psychology:

An ultimate focus on the physical structures and processes of the organism has been shown, in the previous section, to be endemic to attempts to measure psychological constructs as a form of basic research. The same is true for attempts to establish causal models of psychological phenomena. To speak of causes is to speak of perceived interactions amongst physical phenomena. There is no coherent account of causation that that is not based on (or does not derive its logic from) interactions in physical systems. As was true with the discussion of intelligence and its measurement, the focus on the physical organism is not necessarily explicitly acknowledged in research that attempts to make causal claims. Yet, it is necessarily there.

Causal investigations are common in today’s psychology. A high profile example of this from the United States is the increasing pressure from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) for government sponsored research to use randomized controlled trials in order to provide the most conclusive possible results concerning program evaluation (Denzin, 2009; Feuer Towne and Shavelson, 2002). From the perspective of the IES, the value of the randomized control trial is a clear function of its ability to provide the clearest possible evidence of possible effects. These types of investigations are treated as the “gold standard” of scientific evaluation in the social sciences, and are increasingly viewed by many as the only source of truly conclusive evidence within the social sciences.

RATIONALE FOR THE CAUSAL-MECHANICAL APPROACH:

There is a clear rationale for the causal-mechanical approach to conceptualizing the person in psychology (which is not to say that its application is always appropriate). Despite the complexity of the human organism and its environment, there is no reason to expect that the processes of human activity somehow operate independently of the deterministic physical world. It is incoherent to distinguish between physical processes of causation and processes within, e.g., the social world, as if these were mutually exclusive. For example, it would make no sense to claim that 'the person is not only affected by the physical world, but also by signs'. The process of tripping over a threshold is just as much a process of physical causes and effects as the process of a verbal warning to "watch out for the threshold" entering the ears and leading a walker to raise their foot to avoid the threshold.

In general, the processes of human activity may be better understood through an understanding of the component mechanisms¹ that constitute them. This does not mean that these mechanisms will exhibit simple linear causation. Nor does this mean that we can use folk psychological accounts of the reasons for behavior as the basis for causal models of behavior. This second point will be addressed in the next section.

The preceding arguments have shown how the person may be studied as a causal mechanical system, necessarily understood as located within a world of other interacting systems. The behavior of the person may be better understood, predicted, and explained through an understanding of the component processes and their integration within the person as a biological organism. The organism is certainly not the sole or immediate referent of the term person, but it is within the realm of immediate connotations.

A CRITIQUE OF THE CAUSAL-MECHANICAL APPROACH

There are critiques of the causal-mechanical conceptualization of the person in psychological research. One of these is directed against the assumption, commonly found in psychological research, that qualities or characteristics that are discursively attributed to individuals (i.e., talked about as if they were properties of the individual, e.g., 'she is generous') can be understood as qualities or characteristics of the individual organism, and studied in causal-mechanical terms.

This critique is described in the following section. Despite the problems that it identifies with the causal-mechanical approach to studying the person and psychological processes, the remainder of the paper attempts to show that the issues brought up have less to do with the causal-mechanical approach itself (and its general utility to investigations of human beings), and more to do with specific ways of applying it, and integrating it with conceptions of people and psychological constructs.

¹ Mechanism is used in this sense to describe a general physical system with a certain structure that functions in a certain way. This is not intended as a contrast with an organismic view of the processes of the human organism, such as that outlined by von Bertalanffy (1968).

HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE SELF IN A NON-INDIVIDUALIST FRAMEWORK

Rom Harré's critique of cognitivism (Harré, 1998, see also Harré & Gillette, 1994) is also applicable as a critique of causal-mechanical conceptualizations of psychological phenomena. The aspect of cognitivism that Harré is critical of is the practice of characterizing the underlying mechanisms of what is vaguely understood as some kind of hybrid brain-mind in terms of psychological concepts of beliefs, thoughts, knowledge, desires, etc., and attempting to investigate these as a way to make sense of the constitution of thought and behavior in causal-mechanical terms.

According to Harré, this approach has not been wrong so much as confused. The problem is not the assumption that there are hidden mechanisms that, if understood, could better explain how people act and think. Rather, what is problematic are the assumptions that (1) the mind (rather than the brain) is constituted by mechanisms (or that the mind can be talked about as if it were some abstract description of the brain), and (2) that the hidden mechanisms of either the mind or the brain can be characterized in terms of psychological concepts or constructs such as beliefs, thoughts, knowledge, or desires.

Prior to Harré, several authors (Ryle, 1949; Wittgenstein, 1953) have argued that the mechanisms that underlie thought and action cannot be characterized in terms of psychological constructs. To do so reduces these constructs to the extra-discursive world, overlooking their existence as discourse objects, distinct from the underlying mechanisms of the organism. This line of reasoning is described by Williams (2002) who, drawing on Wittgenstein (1953), claims that it is incoherent to treat psychological phenomena, such as anger or beliefs, as causal influences on behavior:

"What counts as anger or belief is constituted by our form of life; to become a believer is to become a member of an participant in that form of life. Thus, for Wittgenstein, the explication of an intentional notion is a conceptual matter, not in the sense of being a metaphysically sanctioned necessity, but in the sense of being constituted by our form of life. Though causal questions can be raised (e.g., how much adrenaline is released when a person gets angry?; what is the time lag between presentation of a visual stimulus and a perceptual report?), it makes no sense to ask what dreams are made of; or how anger or belief cause behavior; or where beliefs are stored." (Williams, 2002, p. 241).

BEYOND THE PERSON AS THE HUMAN ORGANISM

From the causal-mechanical perspective, the individual person is conceptualized as the individual organism. The previous arguments from Wittgenstein, Ryle, Harré and Williams acknowledged that, although there are important causal-mechanical processes within the human organism that can be used to partially explain how and why people behave the ways they do, we cannot characterize these processes in terms of the folk psychological concepts such as anger, intelligence, knowledge, or love, operating in causal mechanical terms.

If the preceding argument is valid, it follows that there must be another way of conceptualizing the person besides as the human organism. If there were not, there would be no explanation for why it is possible to attribute things like anger, intelligence, knowledge or love to individual people.

The Person as a Sign

The second way in which the person is conceptualized is through the use of discourse objects—i.e., signs or words that are used for making sense of one's own psyche and of other people. These include the terms *mind, I, self, me, and you*. In the sense that these can be taken to constitute the individual person, the person must be understood as ontologically social, given that these terms get their meaning through the social process of discourse. Whereas the claim that the person is social makes no sense within the causal-mechanical perspective (except in relation to the socio-genetic claims about the social origin and structure of the higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1978)), it is readily apparent within this new perspective. Harré (2009) makes a similar point about the social nature of the mind, arguing that, in a certain sense, the mind is a social construction:

"The idea that the mind is, in some sense, a social construction is true in that our concepts arise from our discourse and shape the way we think. This goes for the concepts that concern what is around us and also for the concepts that concern our mental lives. Therefore the way in which we conceptualize the mind (or anything else) is a product of the concepts available within our discourse." (Harré, 2009, p. 184)

Drawing on Coulter (1979), Gergen (1985) expresses a similar idea:

"The mind (Coulter, 1979) becomes a form of social myth; the self concept is removed from the head and placed within the sphere of social discourse. In each case, then, what has been taken by one segment of the profession or another as "facts about the nature of the psychological realm" are suspended; each concept (emotion, motive, etc.) is cut away from an ontological base within the head and is made a constituent of social process." (Gergen, 1985).

Although the discursive elaboration of concepts for the person (e.g., *I, self, me, you*) and for psychological phenomena (e.g., *intelligence, love, anger, attitude*) does not mirror the extra-discursive world, this does not mean that this or any other discourse can operate independently of a particular human reality. Any discourse is necessarily grounded in a particular world. The discourse itself is materially constituted, and occurs within and is structured by material contexts. The idea of a discourse that exists independently of any material and social conditions is untenable (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Any discourse is structured by the material conditions (including the materiality of the body), that constitute any particular context of social life. Without the constraints on cognitive and affective organization that these provide, there is no conceivable possibility, not to mention need, for discourse. The idea that there are limits in the form any discourse can take as a

consequence of the structure of the extra-discursive world is described by Slunecko and Hengl (2007) who, speaking of social knowledge, liken it to a baldachin...

"...woven by joint speaking and acting, which floats above people's heads ... this baldachin cannot be constructed with an unlimited amount of degrees of freedom, since the social knowledge it stands for constantly lies under ecological pressure. Whenever a system of social representations is not able to work out explanations for a situation that threatens the collective, it gets strained." (Slunecko & Hengl, 2007, p. 52).

The dependence of any discourse on a particular material reality does not mean that the world as represented in discourse is a mirror of the extra-discursive reality. Instead of understanding discourse as a reflection of the extra-discursive world, we may—following Austin's (1962) account of the performative aspects of language—understand discourse as constructing its own reality, or even better, as dramatically restructuring an existing reality. To illustrate the ways that discourse restructures its own reality (rather than simply reporting on an existing reality), we can consider cases where questions that are ostensibly about the world, turn out to instead be about the discourse. For example, consider the following questions: *Do other animals have minds?*, *Are computers really good for society?* or *What does it mean to be in a relationship?* Answering these questions is not merely a matter of going out and finding evidence to support an answer one way or another. These questions have no objectively "right" answer. Reaching an answer is a matter of deciding based on existing conventions, how we want to apply words like "mind" in less clearly defined contexts, or what we take to be "good for society."

The previous arguments form the foundation for the social constructivist perspective being described here. To return to the issue of psychological concepts (including the concept of *a person*) and fully articulate this position, we may say that, despite the dependence of the use of these signs on a broader material-discursive reality, they are nevertheless crucial parts of that reality themselves—not merely representations of an extra-discursive world that is demarcated isomorphically along the same lines as the concepts in the discourse. Therefore, if we are to seriously investigate these psychological concepts, the fact that they are, in one sense, signs negotiated and used within various discourses cannot be overlooked. We cannot inquire about everyday psychological terms and treat the discourses of which these terms are a part as merely transparent, as if to inquire about them is to inquire directly about the extra-discursive world.

From this perspective, the study of traditional psychological processes and concepts cannot be reduced to the study of the workings of the nervous system. Alternately, if the inner workings of the nervous system are the only object of study (there is nothing wrong with this, in principle), such an investigation cannot be properly described as a study of folk psychological concepts.

In order to study folk psychological concepts within a scientific framework, it necessary to study the ways that these concepts are constructed within a particular discourse. The need

to focus on the discourse in order to understand folk psychological concepts is articulated in the field of discursive psychology by Harré and Gillette (2009).

“In this view, our delineation of the subject matter of psychology has to take account of discourses, significations, subjectivities and positionings, for it is in these that psychological phenomena actually exist. For example, an attitude should not be seen as some semipermanent mental entity, causing people to say and do certain things. Rather it comes into existence in displays expressive of decisions and judgments and in the performance of actions. ...Each reconceptualization helps to draw our attention to the fact that the study of the mind is a way of understanding the phenomena that arise when different sociocultural discourses are integrated within an identifiable human individual situated in relation to those discourses. (Harré & Gillette, 1994, p. 22).

A Place for the Causal-Mechanistic View of the Person:

Just as the study of folk psychological concepts cannot be reduced to the study of the brain, or treated as phenomena of the individual organism, the study of folk psychological concepts cannot be reduced to the study of discourse. The discourses of folk psychological concepts are inseparable from the general material conditions in which they occur. These include the biological organism and the material environment in which it lives. Therefore, within a psychological paradigm that recognizes the socially constructed nature of its concepts, there is still a place for the insights of causal-mechanical investigations of the organism.

INTEGRATING THE PERSONS OF PSYCHOLOGY

In psychology, the person has been investigated in several different ways, two of which were explored here in detail. The person may be understood as the living organism, as well as a socially constructed sign used in discourse (a discourse object). These two conceptualizations provide a richness of meaning, which is an important resource for psychology, yet one that is not automatically useful in its “raw” form.

The previous analysis has shown the problems that arise in psychological research when the distinctions between its conceptual systems are overlooked. These problems have been well illustrated by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Gilbert Ryle, and more recently in the work of Rom Harré, who focuses on the conflation of discursive and biological processes.

To take advantage of the conceptual richness available to psychology, what is needed is a careful hierarchic integration of meanings of the person and the various folk psychological concepts into a general foundation for psychological inquiry. In Wernerian terms, this would reflect a developmental process in line with the orthogenetic principle, under which development leads toward “a state of increasing differentiation and hierarchic integration.” (Werner 1957, p. 126). The preceding analysis shows a clear differentiation in concepts, which may open possibilities for development of thinking in psychology. This article is an attempt not only to describe this differentiation, but also to sketch out a possibility for

hierarchical integration. By hierarchically integrating its highly differentiated collection of concepts, psychology may produce a powerful set of tools for its future.

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