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## New Ideas in Psychology

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### Editorial

## An introduction to the special issue on “The New Psychology of Personhood”

Disciplinary psychology claims the actions and experiences (albeit more typically rendered as the behaviors, cognitions, and emotions) of persons as its subject matter. It is surprising, therefore, how little attention most psychologists have given to conceptualizing and theorizing persons. There has, of course, been considerable attention devoted to selfhood in the research and writing of humanistic, cognitive, developmental, social, and personality psychologists in areas such as self-concept, self-esteem, self-regulation, self-actualization, and so forth. And, more recently, a growing number of cultural and theoretical psychologists have begun to inquire into the identity and agency of persons (e.g., [Kirschener & Martin, 2010](#)). However, discussions of persons per se are surprisingly difficult to locate in the literature of psychology.

This ignoring of personhood is even more puzzling given the person-focused interests and studies of many leading psychologists at the time of, and for some time following, the founding of disciplinary psychology in the late 1800s. At that time, American and European psychologists like William James, Wilhelm Wundt, James Mark Baldwin, John Dewey, William Stern, and Pierre Janet, caught up in the wake of Charles Darwin, focused considerable attention and effort on the psychological development of persons, as emergent through their activity within their biophysical and sociocultural surrounds (see [Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000](#)). However, after such a promising start during the early days of disciplinary psychology, this first generation of psychologists committed to the study of persons interacting holistically within the world was eclipsed during the 1930s–1950s (especially in North America), and much of the time since then, by other psychologists with different programs of inquiry. To date, several generations of behavioral, cognitive, and biological psychologists have demonstrated a preference for theorizing and inquiry into supposed parts of persons (reflexes, behaviors, thoughts, and neurophysiological processes) rather than persons themselves.

During the early and middle twentieth century, many behavioral psychologists studied the activity of intact organisms, but under highly controlled and restricted conditions, in a manner that fitted well within newly formulated doctrines of experimental manipulation and design ([Winston, 1990](#)). Roughly during this same period, approaches to personality that made extensive use of recently developed self-report questionnaires and correlational, psychometric techniques (which tended to ignore context completely) promised greater mathematical, scientific precision and generality ([Nicholson, 2003](#)). More recently, at both theoretical and empirical levels, psychologists of different orientations working in the various sub-disciplines of psychology have tended to prefer a variety of “self” studies to studies of persons per se. Thus, research on self-concept, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-regulation tends to focus on the inner psychological functioning of private selves, and displays little concern with aspects of personhood such as moral agency, biographical detail, or social relations ([Martin, 2007](#)).

Complementing and furthering psychology's focus on interior selfhood, has been a longstanding tradition of experimentation in social and developmental psychology that has restricted social influences on psychological subjects to independent variables that exert proximal, local, short-term, and decomposable effects (Danziger, 2000). Thus, both persons and their historical, sociocultural contexts have been simplified, reduced, and decomposed in much mainstream psychology.

There are indications, however, that persons are making a comeback in psychology. Since the 1960s, two new generations of relational, constitutive theorists,<sup>1</sup> although relatively small in number, have championed approaches to persons and their study that seem to be gaining greater popularity and influence in the landscape of today's disciplinary psychology, despite the current dominance of cognitive and biological psychologies that are much more reductionistic, mentalistic, and narrowly focused on the interior parts of persons. In particular, some theoretical, philosophical, developmental, and critical, historical psychologists and psychologically-minded philosophers (e.g., Barresi, 1999; Bickhard, 2004, 2008; Danziger, 1997; Donald, 2000; Falmagne, 2004; Guignon, 2004; Harré, 1998; Lamiell & Laux, 2010; Martin, 2003, 2008; Martin & Sugarman, 2003; Martin, Sugarman, & Hickinbottom, 2010; Robinson, 2007; Rose, 1996; Smythe, 1998; Sorabji, 2006; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004; Tomasello, 1999, 2008) recently have provided conceptions and theories of persons as biological and cultural hybrids emergent within their worldly contexts and interactions, yet irreducible to their biophysical and sociocultural determinants and constituents. Moreover, psychology itself is now understood by some to be interactive with, even constituted by, the ways in which contemporary persons understand themselves and act as persons (e.g., Danziger, 1990, 1997, 2008; Hacking, 1995, 1998; Rose, 1996).

Partial explanations for the apparently greater, but still conditional and quite rare, acceptance of relational, holistic theorizing about persons this time around might include shifts in philosophy of science away from logical positivism, correspondence theory, and value neutrality; a greater receptivity within psychology to narrative, pragmatic, hermeneutic, critical, and qualitative approaches and methods; a greater concern within institutions of higher learning for the social and environmental consequences of science and technology and increased attention to the ethics of inquiry and application; and a new world order in which questions of recognition, identity, social justice, world citizenship, and progress (or the lack thereof) have emerged that cross national borders and are being played out in increasingly diverse and interactive human communities with the aid and challenge of new communication technologies. However, it also is possible that such discernible movements are less causes than they are other facets of whatever it is that is driving contemporary interest in a renewed psychology of personhood. At any rate, to the extent that psychology is a history of ways in which humans have attempted to understand themselves and their conduct and experience, it is hardly surprising that persons acting in the world eventually should come to figure more prominently in psychological inquiry and theory. What is perhaps more difficult to explain is why a focus on persons in the world has failed to guide so much extant and earlier psychological thought and research.

Given the centrality of personhood to psychological theory and inquiry, and the possibility that psychological theories, research, and practices are themselves strongly implicated in the personhood of many contemporary Westerners, a special issue of *New Ideas* devoted to current work in the psychology of personhood is both timely and important. Several of the papers that make up this special issue are concerned primarily with the conceptualization and understanding of persons, and delve critically into longstanding matters concerning the nature of persons and how they might best be understood (e.g., see the articles herein by Charles Guignon and Daniel Robinson). Interestingly, these philosophically oriented analyses draw from both Anglo-American analytic philosophy and from Continental philosophy, especially the ontological hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger. Other papers that make up this special issue focus on the emergence of persons through their activity, interactivity, and intersubjectivity within biophysical and sociocultural context during both phylogenesis and

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<sup>1</sup> For example, James Wertsch, Michael Cole, Jerome Bruner, Barbara Rogoff, Ivana Markova, Bernard Kaplan, Sergio Moscovici, Ernst Boesch, Ken Gergen, Brent Slife, Frank Richardson, Blaine Fowers, Carl Ratner, Jan Valsiner, René Van der Veer, John Shotter, Mark Freeman, Hubert Hermans, William Smythe, Henderikus Stam, Leendert Mos, John Greenwood, Cor Baerveldt, Svend Brinkmann, John Christopher, Michael Westerman, Alex Gillespie, and several others.

ontogenesis, and consider the role of psychology in understanding and transforming our understanding of ourselves as the kinds of persons we are (e.g., see the articles by Barresi, Bickhard, Martin, and Stetsenko). Several of these latter contributions to the special issue draw inspiration from earlier work in the psychology of personhood by pragmatic thinkers like George Herbert Mead, social-cultural psychologists like Lev Vygotsky, and developmental activity theorists like Jean Piaget. Taken together, the articles in this special issue of *New Ideas in Psychology* serve as a timely and up-to-date introduction to contemporary psychological theory and research that take persons and their interactions within the biophysical and sociocultural world as the core subject matter of psychology.

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