Science, Culture, and the Study of Personality

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Background. The study of personality, particularly the investigation of *individual* personality, remains a thorny issue in psychological science. Many personality studies utilize aggregated data to make comparative statements about groups of persons. Though important for group comparisons, this body of research neglects a careful examination of individual personality.

    Objective. To enhance psychologists' understanding of individual personality process and variation.

    Results and conclusion. This theoretical article suggests two strategies to augment the exploration of individual personality. First, our understanding of individual personality will be enhanced if personality psychologists broaden their research activities to include strategies that lead to a better understanding of individuals rather than groups. These efforts include both qualitative approaches and person-specific quantitative analyses that target individual process and variation. Second, personality psychologists should actively seek greater cultural sensitivity via interdisciplinary collaborations. In particular, the conceptual resources of comparative philosophy and the study of cultural ontological traditions will enhance the ability of personality psychologists to scientifically track the process and variation of individual personality. To this end, the article examines the structural ontology of the West and contrasts it with the process (event based) ontology of the East, showing how these ontological traditions continue to shape the discourse of personality psychology. The article also considers the oneness hypothesis, the world view that all persons (and personalities), creatures, and things are relationally bound together, a viewpoint distinct from the Western value of autonomy and self-sufficiency. As a conceptual resource, the oneness hypothesis derives from a process ontology and has important implications for understanding individual personalities and their place in the social world.

Keywords: Personality structure, personality process, cultural psychology, ontology, the oneness hypothesis

Introduction

Any scientific endeavor will have its twists and turns, blind alleys, and moments of clarity. This certainly holds true when attempting to study scientifically the complexities of human personality, particularly the process and variation inherent in individual personality. Open ten personality textbooks, and you are likely to find ten different definitions of the term "personality." It is not that one or another definition is correct and the others are incorrect; rather, the definitions reflect the differences of perspective in personality psychology.

The reasons for this state of affairs are longstanding and complex. In this article, I briefly trace scientific and cultural forces that have shaped how psychologists think about and study personality. These same forces apply to the study of any psychological phenomenon, although the study of human personality has a unique set of challenges.

Some Relevant Scientific Trends

In the not-too-distant past, American psychologist Lee Cronbach wrote two important articles that are as germane today as they were in 1957 and 1975 when he published them. In the first article, Cronbach (1957) outlined two streams of thinking and methodology that had dominated the science of psychology during the previous century. Both are well known to psychologists. The first was the experimental method, in which the experimenter sought to control a number of variables in a laboratory setting, while manipulating only one to observe its impact on another variable. The second stream, the correlational approach, sought to study relationships as they exist in nature, without exerting any type of control in a laboratory or any other setting. In the former approach, individual differences are seen as problematic. In Cronbach's words, "Individual variation is cast into that outer darkness known as 'error variance' " (p. 674), whereas such individual process and variation are exactly what the correlational strategy sought to explore. Cronbach's article concluded with an appeal for a unified approach to psychological science.

Eighteen years later, Cronbach (1975) wrote a follow-up piece lamenting the lack of progress in disciplinary unification and in theory development. To this end, Cronbach made a number of important observations. Consider this one: "A laboratory generalization, once achieved, may not be a good first approximation to real world relationships" (p. 121). Or this: "The half-life of an empirical proposition may be great or small. The more open a system [*personality is an open system; see Giordano, 2015*], the shorter the half-life of relations within it are likely to be" (p. 123; bracketed italics mine). Or finally, consider this assertion, an idea I will discuss in greater detail below: "Social scientists generally, and psychologists in particular, have modeled their work on physical science, aspiring to amass empirical generalizations, to restructure them into more general laws, and to weld scattered laws

into coherent theory. That lofty aspiration is far from realization" (p. 125). Were Cronbach alive today, I suspect a third article would develop similar themes.

In the 1957 and 1975 pieces, Cronbach was critiquing scientific psychology as a whole, although he did allude to specific challenges in personality psychology. In similar fashion, Monte (1991), in his now classic personality text, outlined similar contours of the controversy as they pertain to personality psychology. Here he distinguished between two schools of thought regarding personality. The first derived from the experimentalists, whose ideas came out of the laboratory. These researchers and theorists (e.g., Skinner, Eysenck, Cattell), sometimes referred to as peripheralists, typically did their work in academic settings, favoring careful quantification and the controls of the scientific laboratory.

The second school of thought originated with clinicians, often with academic appointments as well. These theorists and researchers, sometimes described as totalists or depth psychologists, used their clinical experiences in therapeutic settings to drive their theoretical frameworks and research strategies. Freud and Rogers, though very different in their orientations, fit in this latter group. Less interested in control and precise quantification, these personality theorists worked to understand persons in their natural habitats, so to speak. The parallels to Cronbach's experimental and correlational researchers should be clear.

Taken together, the efforts of Cronbach and Monte, working independently of one another and in different time frames, suggest an important question. What do these two streams of thought and method imply about the scientific study of personality? One implication, and the subtext of these methodological debates, is the degree to which uncertainty in our science is tolerated. In experiencing "physics envy" (Gould, 1981), psychologists have felt compelled to eliminate uncertainty as much as is feasible in their laboratory studies. This compulsion attempts to align psychology with the other sciences that are seen as more empirical – the so-called "hard" sciences, such as physics or chemistry, rather than the "soft" social sciences. It is a status-seeking move.

This bifurcation plays out as well in the (unfortunate) competition between quantitative and qualitative approaches to psychological research. The former is seen as "hard," more precise, and of higher scientific status, whereas the latter is perceived as "soft," less precise, and of lower scientific station. Quantification allows us to feel *as if* we are *collecting* data that are inherent in the phenomenon we are studying. We collect these data *out of* the phenomenon we are studying. In the domain of personality, we may be seduced into thinking that if we can measure and quantify it with precision, whatever "it" happens to be, then it exists as a discrete entity or "substance" in nature, much as a potassium ion or photon of light exists in the natural world. A potential problem with this orientation is that we reify constructs as we attempt to quantify them (Gould, 1981). By quantifying the amount of a person's extraversion, for example, we assume we have tapped into the person's "true" amount of extraversion. The oft-quoted maxim, "let the data speak for themselves" reflects this orientation. To be fair, quantification does have utility when the scientific goal is to aggregate data in order to make quantitative comparisons between groups of people. At the level of individual personality, however, knowing a group's average amount of [fill in the construct] will tell us little about any indi-

vidual person's behavior at any specific point in time and in any specific context (Giordano, 2018; Giordano, Taylor, & Branthwaite, 2018).

As an alternative viewpoint, particularly in the domain of personality psychology, it is preferable to think of data *derivation* approaches, rather than data *collection* strategies. This way of thinking about data has been highly developed by Valsiner (see Valsiner, 2000, for one example) and sees data as ambiguous representations of semi-structured phenomena that are in part affected by the researcher's interaction with the psychological phenomenon under study (Valsiner, 2000). This conceptualization speaks to the inherent instability and uncertainty in studying psychological phenomena because they are semi-structured and dynamic. Therefore we do not collect data from a sample; we derive it from the phenomenon as we interact with it. This way of thinking, however, is problematic for a hard science orientation, even though, as both Clegg (2010) and Freeman (2011) have argued, uncertainty is part and parcel of any scientific endeavor. Uncertainty should be welcomed, not avoided. Besides, uncertainty and ambiguity are what make *individuals* interesting.

The Contributions of Cultural Psychology

More recently, some personality psychologists have embraced the relevance of cultural phenomena in shaping and maintaining personality. This trend has been a long time coming, although with globalization it has been inevitable and will only continue to gain traction. Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan's (2010) seminal work provided powerful evidence across a range of psychological phenomena of the error of studying only W.E.I.R.D. samples, as is common in the US, and then generalizing to all persons around the globe. W.E.I.R.D. people are Western, Educated, from Industrialized countries, Rich, and from Democratic societies. The work of Henrich et al., as well as many others (see Cheung & Ho, 2018; Keith, 2013; Kitayama & Uskul, 2011; Markus, & Kitayama, 2010; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Valsiner, 2014) has made it clear that cultural forces cannot be ignored when studying psychological phenomena, including personality.

And yet the neglect of culture, or at least an insensitivity to its nuances, persists. This problem is seen clearly in the widespread use of the Big Five taxonomy when an imposed etic strategy is adopted. Although the Big Five may be useful when studying groups of persons in the United States, its value in other cultures has been challenged. Take, for example, the sophisticated work of Fanny Cheung in Hong Kong. Cheung and colleagues (Cheung & Ho, 2018) call into question the (imperialistic) imposed etic approach to describing and measuring personality. They observe that, "In Asian cultures, many emic constructs are not covered in Western personality models, such as the concepts of 'harmony' and 'face' in the Chinese context …, 'amae' (sweet indulgence) in the Japanese context, and 'chong' (affection) in the Korean context …" (p. 213). Foregrounding the significance of culture, they argued for a *combined* etic (imperialistic) and emic (indigenous) approach to personality theory and measurement. Following this perspective, they developed and validated the Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory (Cheung, et al., 1996), which takes into account the cultural foundations of personality construction in a Chinese population.

Diverse Ontological Traditions

At an even more foundational level, however, are *cultural assumptions* that scaffold the study of personality. Often these assumptions are accepted axiomatically, though they should be made explicit and examined. As one example, a purely imposed etic approach to studying personality is blind to culturally embedded assumptions about persons, their relationships with others, their "selves," their place in civil society, and so on.

Here I discuss the ontological footing of cultural worldviews, which I have written about in previous publications (Giordano, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018). The bottom line is this: It is unwise to theorize about human personality without making explicit the ontological assumptions giving rise to theoretical perspectives. For instance, generally speaking (there are always exceptions), the ontological tradition of Western cultures has construed the world, including persons and personalities, as consisting of entities that are relatively fixed, static, and stable. This ontological outlook provides the philosophical foundation for thinking of persons as autonomous and personal characteristics as stable and quantifiable. Any personality perspective that emphasizes personality *structures* such as autonomous "selves" or "egos" or "dispositions/traits" originates from this ontological viewpoint. If you have grown up in a Western culture, this perspective resonates as common sense.

Comparative philosopher Roger Ames (2011) and colleagues (Ames & Hall, 2001; Ames & Rosemont, 2009; Rosemont & Ames, 1998) refer to this Western perspective as a Being (or substance) ontology. To acknowledge and to be consistent with these scholars, in my past work on this topic I have referred to this ontology as a Being ontology. Thanks to the insights of Kostromina and Grishina (2018) and Mironenko (2018), going forward I will refer to this ontological tradition as a structure ontology (see Giordano et al., 2018), because, for psychologists, this label more accurately reflects the essence of this worldview.

In contrast, generally speaking the ontological tradition of Eastern cultures (e.g., East, Southeast, and South Asia) has construed the world, including persons and personalities, in terms of *events and processes* rather than structures and entities. We can label this ontological perspective as a Becoming or process ontology (Ames, 2011). In contrast to structures, processes and events are unstable, dynamic, emergent, novel, and contextual. A "personality" from this vantage point is not a fixed, stable entity; rather, it is more accurately understood as evolving, dynamic, and emerging in social context. Any one *individual* personality is therefore difficult to quantify in any meaningful way, as a result of its emergent and unstable properties.

From this ontological vista, personality does not consist of substances or entities *within the person*. Personality-as-process exists *between* persons, so to speak, and between persons and situations, emerging moment-by-moment as contexts change. One simple example illustrates this perspective. Ask a 16-year-old if she behaves the same around her peers as she does when she is with her parents. The most typical answer will be a resounding NO! Why is this the case? From a structure ontology, we could argue that she is in fact the same person (i.e., her personality is stable), but the situation "pulls for" different behaviors. Fair enough. Person–situation interactions are well documented in the scientific literature.

However, it is equally plausible to invoke a Becoming ontology – in fact, this young woman's personality is not stable; it is always emergent as it responds to different social contexts, in this case peers or parents. Why should we not adopt this point of view? One reason may be that structures are easier than processes to study, measure, and quantify – an important component of "hard" science. Another reason may be that we automatically operate out of our own ontological perspectives, without considering the viability of other viewpoints. To understand individual personalities in terms of processes is a relatively new approach, although it may be gaining momentum in scientific circles (Kostromina & Grishina, 2018).

The contrast between process and structure ontology is also foundational to the well-known work of Markus and Kitayama (1991, 2010) on the distinction between the interdependent and the independent self. The former, more common in Eastern cultures (though not exclusively so), is relational and therefore dynamic, emergent, and processual. The song lyric at the outset of this article, though Western in its origin, is instructive. It pushes back on the independent/autonomous self, rendering it meaningless and empty ("you're nobody") outside of caring social interactions. "You're nobody 'til somebody loves you" is a concrete articulation of process ontology, and the lyric should not be construed merely as clever, romantic song-writing. It reflects an ontological orientation.

Relational selfhood is found in a number of Eastern philosophical traditions. In previous work, I have tried to show how classical Confucianism can provide rich conceptual resources for understanding individual personality as relational and process-centric (Giordano, 2014, 2015). Though quite different from Confucianism, the Buddhist perspective, a tradition that is highly psychological in its orientation (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006), also reflects a process ontology. According to Buddhist philosophy, the self as structurally stable is an illusion and a source of mental suffering. The function of meditation in these traditions (there are many and diverse Buddhist systems of thought and practice) is to become aware of the ever-changing flow of thought, often characterized both by fear and by the desire for things to be different than what they are. The dispassionate cognitive observation during meditation reveals there really is no "self" that is creating these patterns of thought. The thoughts just occur, one leading to another, to another, and so on, based on one's previous experiences and conditioning. One does not need to be a Buddhist monk living in a monastery to discover this quality of consciousness. Even beginning meditators can see these cognitive processes at work, processes that are sometimes referred to as the "monkey mind." The metaphors of "train of thought" or "stream of consciousness" reflect this quality of our minds. This ontological position is cogently articulated by Buddhist monk Bhante Gunaratana (2015):

"In all that collection of mental hardware in this endless stream of ever-shifting experience, all you can find is innumerable impersonal processes that have been caused and conditioned by previous processes. *There is no static self to be found; it is all process* [italics mine]. You find thoughts but no thinker, you find emotions and desires, but nobody doing them. The house itself is empty. There is nobody home." (p. 168)

This quote by Gunaratana as well as the scholarship of Roger Ames and colleagues, which I briefly discussed above, clearly express a process ontology that is embedded in the experience of literally billions of people on the planet. This way of understanding human personality and the human experience may be alien to many Westerners, including personality psychologists, but for many others it is common sense.

The Oneness Hypothesis

To further this argument, I will draw on the important interdisciplinary work of comparative philosopher and Confucian scholar Philip Ivanhoe. The relational and process-oriented conception of human personality is the core of what Ivanhoe (2017) calls the *oneness hypotheses*. The oneness hypothesis is "the claim that we — and in particular our personal welfare or happiness — are inextricably intertwined with other people, creatures, and things" (Ivanhoe, 2017, p. 1). Strains of the oneness hypothesis can be found in the work of Western intellectuals such as James, Dewey, and Mead (see Ivanhoe, p. 18).

I highlight Ivanhoe's work here for two reasons. First, the oneness hypothesis reflects a process-centric ontology. Second, Ivanhoe's scholarship is elegantly interdisciplinary and, just as he draws on the work of psychology, psychologists would do well to be informed by this philosophical material. As Ivanhoe points out, the oneness hypothesis is not just a statement about how all people, creatures, and things are connected. The implications are more important than mere connection. Ivanhoe avers,

> Most basically, the oneness hypothesis is a claim about the nature of the world. Inevitably, this includes a view about the nature of the self and the other people, creatures, and things of the world. The core and the most characteristic assertion of the oneness hypothesis is that we are inextricably intertwined with other people, creatures, and things in ways that *dispose us to care for the rest of the world much as we care for ourselves*. (p. 30; italics mine)

Valuable in understanding the nature of persons and personalities, the oneness hypothesis, therefore, also raises important ethical considerations for how we should live our lives and relate to other people. In providing a historical and cultural survey of notions of the self, Ivanhoe concludes that an understanding of these complexities "should put to rest the authority and dominance of hyper-individualistic conceptions of the self" (p. 44), and by extension should put to rest a purely structural ontology.

My aim here is not to unpack Ivanhoe's discussion of the oneness hypothesis in detail. Ivanhoe's work is accessible even to non-philosophers, and I refer the interested reader to his monograph. My objective is again to underscore for Western readers an important ontological tradition that may be unfamiliar, but can inform our understanding of individual personality process and variation. Ivanhoe's interdisciplinarity is instructive as well, as I have already noted. He weaves together material from philosophy, psychology, sociology, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology. Psychological descriptions and explanations of individual personality will be enriched when enlightened by a wide array of academic traditions.

Conclusion: Culture, Interdisciplinarity, and the Evolution of Personality Psychology

At this juncture, one might legitimately ask why we are discussing Confucianism, Buddhism, and the oneness hypothesis. Isn't this article about personality and scientific psychology? The significance of these traditions for contemporary personality psychology is that for millennia and for billions of people in the world today they have shaped and continue to shape how persons and personalities are understood in non-Western cultures. Personality psychology should continue to break down cultural and disciplinary barriers and draw on conceptual ideas that are important in other cultural contexts and in diverse academic disciplines. Examining ontological foundations is one example of this strategy.

Further, seeking to understand human personality is not the sole domain of psychological science. But one might argue that it is our methodology that defines psychology as an academic discipline. If we are not collecting and analyzing data, then we are not doing scientific psychology. We might be doing something important, but it is not psychology. But this type of hard boundary delineation is a red herring and does not aid our understanding of personality, particularly the process and variation at the level of the individual. Philip Ivanhoe is not less of a comparative philosopher because he draws significantly on the work of psychological science. In fact, his work is more compelling because he shows how a variety of academic disciplines illuminate the idea of the oneness hypothesis. Similarly, psychologists with a qualitative bent or an interest in ontological considerations are not less scientific merely because they not crunching numbers (Gergen, Josselson, & Freeman, 2015). To be fair, the issue really is not one of qualitative or quantitative pursuits. There now exist newer mathematical modeling approaches (subject-specific analyses) for studying individual process and variation in personality (Molenaar, 2004; Molenaar & Campbell, 2009; Nesselroade & Molenaar, 2010). The central point here is that the method we select for scientific study puts constraints on the questions we ask and the answers we find (Giordano et. al, 2018). Interdisciplinary work helps break down some of these constraints.

The methodological rapprochement that Cronbach (1957, 1975) sought has still not been realized, and perhaps this reconciliation is not desirable. Perhaps it is the variation in our scientific practices and in our interdisciplinary collaborations that keeps the study of individual personality dynamic and moving forward. When trying to understand something as thorny as individual personality process and variation, we need all the scientific, interdisciplinary, and cultural resources we can muster.

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