Examining the Cultural Constitution of the Category of Person

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1. Introduction: the Cultural Relativity of the Category of Person

One of the central social and psychological categories is the "category of person" (Mauss, 1933; Sampson, 1985). The fact that there are fundamental differences in the cultural constitution of the category of the person has eluded psychological attention until recently. A closer inspection of historical, anthropological and recent cross-cultural research suggests that our notions of the person as a constitutive principle, in order to understand the individual and to predict and explain his/her behavior, are culture specific and possibly even misleading. Our contemporary understanding of the terms "self", "identity" and "person" in the Western world is an historically and culturally "idiomsyntatic" one. As Geertz (1979) pointed out:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures (p. 229).

The currently prevailing Western notion of the individual as an isolated, separated and unique entity is the product of considerable historical change. Cherry (1967, p. 463), for example, highlights this point by examining the etymology of the concept of the individual. This concept, derived form the Latin *individuum* originally appears to have had a dual meaning. Cicero, using it in Democritus' sense, referred to it as an individual "atom", very much in today's sense. Tacitus, on the other hand, in the post-Christian period used it as meaning "inseparable", which is also how it was used in mediaeval theological argument referring to a person as inseparably involved in some group and representing that group. "Individual" meant an "inseparable unity", as in the "Holy and individual Trinity" or (as Milton used it) "the individual (= indivisible) Catholicke Church". Even in the 17th Century, a husband and wife were "individual". It referred to a person, or thing, which had no separate existence apart from one another, or from the group. (Cherry, 1967, p. 463)

There are diverse social historical reasons which are advanced for the transformation of this understanding of the person to its current atomistic or ego-centred conception, which are beyond the scope of this contribution. These arguments, coming from literary, philosophical and social historical sources, date the origins of our present conception of the person around the 16th and 17th centuries and link it, among other things, to the emergence of social mobility, the growth of a bourgeois middle class, and the increasingly secular attitudes and questionings which arose with the becoming of "science".

Even a cursory examination of cross cultural work on conceptions of identity reveals that there are considerable divergences in the way in which identities are embedded in social relationships, along with how responsibilities for the actions of a person are attributed. Across and within societies, one finds that "personhood" or identity can be conceptualized as relative manifestations within a social organization. For example, one finds in a variety of societies that "the individual is born with his name and his social functions ... The number of individuals, names, souls and roles is limited in the clan and the line of the clan is merely a collection (ensemble) of rebirths and deaths of individuals who are always the same" (Mauss, 1906, in Allen, 1986, p. 33). Recent cross-cultural research shows, for example, that in India, as in various other cultures, there are distinctly holistic and thus relational cultural conceptions of the person, whereby the social role is treated as the primarily normative unit rather than the "individual" (see Miller, 1984;
Shweder & Miller, 1985). Another example is to be found in traditional Japanese culture, formed under the strong influence of Confucianism, where “personhood” is not individualistic. The status of the person is a dependent one, identifying the individual in terms of his/her affiliation with a certain social group and perceiving him/her as the sum total of several autonomous “areas of duties” such as “ko” (to one’s parents), “giri” (to the people to whom one is indebted socially), “jin” (humanity and loyalty), “ninjo” (duties to oneself), etc. (cf. Kon, 1984). Thus, the category of person and its assessment is related to the person’s area of action. Behavior is derived from the general rule, the norm, where personality in our Western sense is not valued but “personhood” is seen as duties and responsibilities resulting from being part of the community, or family, where the self is not separable from the role (Kon, 1984). Geertz (1973) in the context of his studies in Bali notes:

“... a persistent and systematic attempt to stylize all aspects of personal expression to the point where anything idiosyncratic, anything characteristic of the individual merely because he is who he is physically, psychologically or biographically, is muted in favour of his assigned place in the continuing...”

Read (1955) in a discussion of the Gahuku-Gama of New Guinea argues that their conception of man does not distinguish between the “individual” and the status that the person occupies. The Gahuku-Gama fail “... to separate the individual from the social context and, ethically speaking, to grant him an intrinsic moral value apart from that which attaches to him as an occupant of a particular status” (Read, 1955, p. 257). As Shweder and Bourne (1982) point out, “exotic” conceptions of “personhood” contrast “... with a Western mode of social thought in which the “individual” is abstracted from the social role, and the moral responsibilities of this abstracted, inviolate individual are distinguished from his/her social responsibilities and duties” (p. 168).

2. The Social Psychological Implications of the Category of Person

What we have been doing so far is to identify cultural differences in the constitution of the category of the person. As Triandis, Bon- tempo, Villareal, Asai & Luca (1988) point out in their recent paper, one of the possible ways of coming to social psychological terms with a fuzzy concept such as culture is by examining what they term “determining dimensions of cultural variation” (p. 323). The dimension that is pertinent to the differences in the cultural construction of the person can be termed “collectivism” versus “individualism” (Hofstede, 1980). The social psychological significance of this dimension is to be found in the differences of the person’s relationship to the group or in the way identities are embedded in social relationships. Triandis (1988), in contrasting collectivism to individualism, points out that in collectivism, personal goals are subordinate to ingroup goals, greater stress is put on the social norms and duties; the types of beliefs are consensual to the ingroup; there is higher readiness towards ingroup cooperation, and emotional attachment to the ingroup is stronger; inter alia. Other comparable distinctions are made with respect to differences in the types of social activities whereby cultures that are predominantly collectivist (e.g., Chinese) display more “situation centred” rather than “individual centred” activities (Hsu, 1981); or a stronger “social orientation” than an “individual orientation” (Yang, 1981).

One psychological translation of the cultural dimension of collectivism-individualism has been to examine it as an individual difference variable, namely allocentrism — idiocentrism (e.g., Triandis, Leung, Villareal & Clack, 1985; Triandis, et al., 1988). This essentially is a translation of the cultural differences to an individual difference scale by which one can examine the degree to which individuals represent a collectivist (allocentric) or individualistic (idio-centric) orientation. Another psychological implication is differences in everyday social interaction styles. Wheeler, Reis and
Bond (1989) demonstrate that in Hong Kong, a predominantly collectivist culture, interactions between students were longer but fewer, with a greater percentage of group and task interactions compared to students in the U.S. It has also been shown that variations in cultural conceptions of the person are associated with differences in social-cognitive processes. Stronger situational attributions are made in societies where the social role is treated as the primary normative unit and reference in comparison with societies that have an “individual-centred” emphasis where dispositional attributions are more prominent (cf. Miller, 1984; Shweder & Miller, 1985; Shweder & Bourne, 1982). For instance, Miller (1984) reports a comparative study of the types of attributions Indian and American adults and children make for both pro-social and deviant behaviours. She demonstrates that Americans at older ages utilize more dispositional explanations and fewer contextual ones than Hindus. Her developmental study shows that whereas American subjects increasingly use dispositional explanations the reverse is the case for Hindus. These results illustrate the differential impact of cultural conceptions of the person on the attributional process.

3. Studying Insults as a Method of Uncovering the Cultural Construction of Personhood

We approached the investigation of the cultural construction of the category of the person by focusing on an everyday practice that questions or challenges what it means to be a person (Semin & Rubini, 1990). One prototypic instance of such a social practice is “... verbal abuse which involves denial of what is near and dear to a person. Thus, verbal abuse can be psychologically revealing since it enables one to examine those aspects of the person which are culturally so critical that their denial removes a central feature of the category of person prevailing in the culture” (Semin & Rubini, 1990). The types of insults we were interested in collecting were decontextualized ones, namely those that prevail in a culture generally rather than those which arise in specific contexts, between specific subgroups who share a joint biography or history, or are peculiar to specific professional or ritualized activities, etc. The argument we advanced was the following. In the case of individualistic cultures, the person is conceptualized as an autonomous agent. Thus insults in such cultures should be directed to the person as the singular object of abuse. Conversely, for collectivist cultures, the central feature of the person is his or her relations to the “ingroup” which could involve kin, village, ethnic or regional membership, and so on. Thus, we postulated that types of verbal abuse should index cultural orientation and that we should be able to distinguish between individualistic and relational (or collectivist) verbal insults as a function of the orientation that is dominant in the culture. Our proposition was simply that the examination of the prevalence of different types of verbal abuse can provide a general methodological entry to the examination of the cultural constitution of the category of the person. The hypothesis we advanced suggested that, in collectivistic cultures, verbal abuse that is typically relational, namely involving kin or group membership, will be more pronounced in contrast to individualistic cultures where verbal abuse that is directed only to the person will be more prominent.

We examined this hypothesis by investigating insult types that can be found in three regions of Italy: Northern, Central and Southern. The idea behind this was based on the assumption that Southern Italian cultural orientations are predominantly collectivist which stems largely from a reliance upon a traditional family form (cf. Galtung, 1971; Schneider & Schneider, 1976). In Northern Italy, we expected a predominantly individualistic conception of the person largely due to the high degree of industrialization and a stronger Central European influence. In our study we operationalized this cultural variation by choosing three samples from three cities: Catania, Bologna and Trieste, and predicted that relational or collectivistic insults would be more prominent in Catania (South) than Trieste (North), with Bologna occupying an intermediary position between the two, in particular due to migration to Bologna from the South and North. What we find is in line with our expectations as can be seen from Figure 1. We find that relational insults vary as a function of town from South to North, with significantly more relational in-
sults in the South and less in the North. The reverse is however not obtained for individualistic insults. Considering that the data for this study were obtained from three cities located in a country sharing the same language community and relatively homogeneous media (radio, TV, newspapers), the investigation of verbal abuse proves to be an important indirect method of unfolding the cultural construction of the category of the person. We would like to suggest that this tool may indeed be very powerful in the examination of how people construct identities as a function of different contexts that are experimentally controlled. For instance, if one were to provide a series of individualistic and relational insults within contexts that are experimentally manipulated, such as a group context or an individual context, then the likelihood of insult type (relational versus individual) should vary systematically. In that sense, the focus on insults provides a powerful psychological tool for the indirect examination of how identities are constructed culturally and also in different situative contexts.

4. Conclusions

More broadly, the focus on the cultural constitution of the person opens new vistas in the conceptualization of fundamental issues in psychology such as personality, focussing on personality as an independent unit of analysis with the notion of "individuality" underpinning the scientific endeavour. This individualistic reduction of personality detaches the person completely from his/her social context. The idea that we can capture the person by focussing on individual psychology and deleting the social context of the person is virtually like deleting the bases of what permits the person to be what it is in the first instance. The considerations advanced in our contribution suggest that certain central conceptions in our psychological science may very much be culturally conditioned folklore.

References


Geertz, C. (1979). From the native's point of view.


