Concepts of Individual, Self, and Person in Description and Analysis

This article asserts the need to distinguish among "individual," "self," and "person" as biologistic, psychologistic, and sociologistic modes of conceptualizing human beings. The concepts differentiate individual as member of the human kind, self as locus of experience, and person as agent-in-society. The author follows out various descriptive and analytical implications. Ethnographic examples are used to illustrate and clarify points relevant to single-case studies and comparativist work. Within a particular local scheme, concepts of individual, self, and person are interrelated, sometimes hierarchically so. The article briefly takes up issues following from the double nature of these concepts as "native" categories and outsiders' analytical constructs. It is held that adopting as analytically central any one mode of conceptualizing human beings has consequences for the analyst's view of culture and/or social structure.

In studying concepts of "person" and "self," anthropologists take up a set of subjects that only marginally engaged the discipline's attention in the past. At the same time, philosophical writings dealing with epistemological, ontological, moral, and bioethical concerns explore issues of human identity, intention, agency, and causation. Moral philosophers, ethicists, and philosophers of action are like traditional epistemologists in focusing on the transcendental subjects of belief, thought, knowledge, and conduct. They commonly use "person" to mean the experiencing, behaving self. (See for example the essays by Nagel 1979.) Questions about person and self are central to other fields also. Political theory, legal doctrine, psychology, and theology deal with human beings as doers, perceivers, believers, and knowers. As usual, anthropology differs from the other disciplines in seeking to know what concepts are or have been used in societies and cultures of other places and times as well as our own and to find ways of comparing and accounting for the variations.

All else aside, a common feature runs through anthropological and other work: concepts of person, self, and, also, individual are often conflated. The consequences are serious, for the issues are theoretically important and not merely terminological. In anthropology, one result is that various ethnographies do not lend themselves easily to comparison. Potential cross-disciplinary work is also hampered. Certainly in anthropology we need to distinguish among conceptualizations of human beings as (1) living entities among many such entities in the universe, (2) human beings who are centers of being or experience, or (3) human beings who are members of society. That is, we need to distinguish, for any local system, among biologistic, psychologistic, and sociologistic concepts—concepts that may parallel without being coextensive with Western biological, psychological, and sociological formulations. Besides improving understanding within anthropology, such clarity can help us to see when anthropologists, philosophers, and others are really dealing with similar questions and when they are not. Theoretical discussion can also advance.

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This article presents what I see as fundamental distinctions among the concepts of individual, self, and person, taking the view that local varieties of these concepts are in use everywhere. Discussion of some analytic issues completes the paper.

**Individual**

A concept of the individual is one focusing on a human being considered as a single member of the human kind. Not all individuals acquire the standing of full persons as agents-in-society (see below).

In distinguishing between being an individual and being a person in given societies it is important to determine whether the entity is considered to be a "normal" member of the kind. It seems to hold everywhere that people look to an ideal of "normal" human characteristics. These are seen as making possible the performance of meaning-laden conduct, that is, conduct construable or interpretable as action, according to a system of principles. "Normal" infants are generally seen as having those characteristics only potentially, while some "non-normal" older humans are seen as never acquiring them, being defective to an extreme degree. Universally, the single most important species characteristic acquired by "normal" individuals is considered to be use of language as associated with capacity for human culture.

That that is so everywhere makes anthropological sense, for anthropologists have long recognized that language makes possible a number of major features of ordinary human life. Language enables humans to survey, indeed to create past, present, and future within which to situate their own and others' conduct, to evaluate conduct retrospectively, and, prospectively, to plan. In Western psychological terms, the critical related faculty is the second-order monitoring that we label "self-awareness" (Harré 1979:282). This reflexive awareness, embedded in and shaped by linguistic usages, enables humans to respond to their own conduct as well as to that of others. In brief, the use of language makes it possible for an individual to develop a self living in a world of beings recognized as having or being selves, some of whom are persons.

The second major feature of human life dependent on language lies in the nature of social interaction as discourse. In the world of social discourse, language mediates all the institutions and activities in and through which humans respond to each other. Marriage is not "mating"; giving a lecture is different (or so one hopes) from "vocalizing"; a tragic death is not merely the cessation of vital functions in a body. In the public world of mutual construal, people use and manipulate the structure and generative capacities of their own language and culture to create, re-create, and alter their institutions.

Third, language is constitutive of many elements of action by way of speech acts such as stating, greeting, commanding, promising, and judging. Individuals unable to use language cannot draw on this resource and so must remain little more than members of the kind.

Fourth, through language a sense of time is linked to that continuity of identity without which accountability for conduct cannot exist. If neither I nor others could consider me to be the same entity today as yesterday, neither I nor others could hold me accountable for what I did yesterday. My performance today would neither bear upon a future nor have any significance in relation to a past. Plans and promises would be impossible. There would be no ongoing social discourse in which individuals could participate, and so humans could be conceptualized neither as selves nor as persons. Yet it is the distinct but related capacities for selfhood and personhood toward which concepts of the human individual look: Charles Taylor, touching on the social and cultural embeddedness of people seen as selves, notes that any significance-free account of humans must be inadequate. To humans, the situations they are in always have significance for them, and between different cultures significances vary (Taylor 1985:107).

Among those of Western anthropological persuasion, the capacities we reckon as characteristic of normal individuals of the species are associated with bodily characteristics
considered fundamental to human psychological potentialities. The biologically oriented, psychologized language of much of our own discourse explicates the analytic relevance of the concept of the individual for Western anthropologists. At the same time, it bears directly on universal concerns. However, when we look at ethnographic accounts we find that universally recognized language-related capacities are fitted into different overall views of humanness. First, the boundaries of the kind are not everywhere drawn in the same manner but may, for example, be set by ethnic divisions or by a local model of spatio-moral relations. Second, individual humans are not everywhere seen as confined to the usual bodily shape and capacities. European werewolves, Ojibwa cannibal monsters, and shape-shifting magicians in parts of Africa provide examples. Third, doctrines concerning bodily composition and structure, fetal development, later growth, maturation, and reproductive capacities can assert differences among categories of human individuals of a magnitude unfamiliar to Euro-American culture. Thus in Papua, New Guinea, elaborate systems of thought present the sexes as differing varieties of humanity, each having its own natural connections with the non-human world (Poole 1981:121-122). Fourth, the mutual permeability of individual human bodies varies greatly. Hence Marriott, while conflating individual and person, examines the way in which the primitive elements of the Hindu world flow in and out of a human being so as to make the latter an almost constantly changing configuration (Marriott 1976:109-142). Finally, the integrity of the kind as an autonomously reproducing line of organisms must be challenged by some kinds of incarnate deities.

These few among many possible illustrations support the view that, far from being a matter for general agreement, the individual as human unit is the subject of divergent doctrines cross-culturally. Everywhere there is a human kind embracing the home society or at least its socially dominant members. Everywhere there are individuals labeled as belonging to that kind. But the scope of the kind differs and so do its asserted biophysical processes. We can expect the conceptualization of capacities for and constraints on behavior to connect these various ideas in complex ways with the other principal modes of conceptualizing human beings, to which I now turn.

**Self**

To work with a concept of self is to conceptualize the human being as a locus of experience, including experience of that human's own someoneness.

In the psychologized view of the West, reflexive awareness of the individual is seen as yielding a duality of self. In one aspect, the self is subject, author of behaviors known to their author as the latter's own and so distinguished from the behaviors of any other someone. In its other aspect, the self is an object some aspects of which are brought within its own purview by the normal human capacity for noticing one's noticing. The latter is the activity that makes human beings (and perhaps some other animals) self-aware.

The self as existential “I,” though intermittent, is fundamental to a sense of self-identity. The categorical “me,” the self as object, is cognized and recognized as distinct from all other objects in the world, with a set of beliefs about itself. It may experience itself as a unique unity, achieving a sense of personal identity. Since the major works of Cooley and Mead, the self as a product of social experience has engaged the attention of social psychology (see Cooley 1912 and Mead 1934). Yet the precise nature of self is disputed as various psychologies pursue their own theories of the self's development, dynamics, and pathologies.

Geertz, in discussing his observations on Balinese ethnosophical psychology with its radical de-emphasis on individuation, eschews claims of knowing how Balinese really experience themselves “in themselves.” His concern is with a culture, that is, with a public symbolic order (Geertz 1973:360-364). That must be the rule in sociocultural anthropology, for while public, shared concepts must help to shape private experience, it remains doubtful whether anthropologists have means for gaining access to that experience
as experience. Certainly we have the means to discover what materials and processes are used to construct the self in a given society, and that is a different enterprise from discovering the public concept of the self. Hence, claims that we can know what it is like to be a self in a different society arouse skepticism. As with individual, we have to ask what, if any, comparable doctrines of self are employed in local schemes.

There can, of course, be other ways of conceiving of the self without systematized ideas paralleling the self of modern Western psychologies. Godfrey Lienhardt argues that Dinka religion represents the self as passively experiencing the impositions of external agents, especially mystical ones. Suffering is “imaged,” objectified, and projected in something in the world outside the self (Lienhardt 1961:149–154). Maurice Leenhardt claims that a vegetational concept of the human body prevented members of a New Caledonian society from incorporating “their” bodies in their ideas about selves until they became Christians (Leenhardt 1979:164).

A few other general points can be made. One concerns the continuity of the self and of identity. Sleep and dreaming, hallucination, and the effects of alcohol and other drugs raise questions in many societies. Yet some questions that an anthropologist might raise appear to be meaningless in other parts of the world, or else the answers are taken for granted. For example, teachings about spirit possession would appear to involve ideas of possible breaks in the availability of the self as object, but just what is involved may be of no local concern. Other matters call for more ethnographic investigation into ideas about the genesis of self, the self’s unity or non-unity in the face of multiple social identities, and the self’s relation to bodily birth, development, aging, and death; views of human selfhood in relation to moral claims; and concepts about the selves, if any, of non-human entities.

All cultures appear to teach that any normal human past early childhood has some measure of capacity for privileged knowledge of that human’s own experiences, including the experience of continuity. Without some version of the assumption that the human world is populated by more-or-less persisting selves, mutual accountability would be impossible. In other words, no concept of the person could exist in the absence of a culturally shared concept of the self.

As to knowledge of other selves, cross-cultural variation is striking. Thus the Taita of southern Kenya ventured only cautious guesses based on observation of behavior (Harris 1978:51). Middle-class Americans readily practice attempts to read other selves, a practice that supports and is supported by psychologistic social science.

Person

Dealing with a concept of person entails conceptualizing the human or other being as an agent, the author of action purposively directed toward a goal. By “human person” I mean a human being publicly considered an agent. In this sense, to be a person means to have a certain standing (not “status”) in a social order, as agent-in-society. Consequently, it is not sufficient to a discussion of personhood to talk about people as centers of experience, selves. To be a person means to be a “somebody” who authors conduct construed as action.

It is noteworthy that in many ethnographically recorded ideas about the person, not all persons are living humans or, indeed, human at all, nor are all human beings persons. Some deceased humans may be conceptually endowed with attributes of personhood (see Smith 1974:140–145). So may non-human animals as well as various other entities ranging from deities to diseases. The last is especially instructive: a disease viewed as entirely mechanistic is a non-personal process operating causally, but smallpox treated as a goddess can also be a person or person-like being, an agent (Babb 1975:129–131). As Hallowell has discussed through papers effectively distinguishing persons from selves, the members of some societies live in a world full of non-human entities conceptualized as persons, as authors of actions affecting human life (Hallowell 1963, 1976 [1960]). Such a
world contrasts with that of modern science, where mechanism-cause excludes the notion of personal agents from non-social contexts and, in extreme views, from social life as well. Whatever the particular case, it is probably true that the model for all notions of non-human persons or person-like beings is the living human person (see Fortes 1987:261). I would add, however, that in Western societies we see how ideas about mechanistic causes operating in the non-human world can invade and reshape concepts of the human person (see Sperry 1983:107-108). If there are in some societies ideas of an impersonal force or power, they can be expected to impinge on concepts of person. If human persons can gain access to external power, that is an aspect of humanity's place in the cosmos to be considered in delineating the agentive capacities of human and non-human persons (but see Firth 1967[1940] on mana).

To focus on human persons as agents-in-society directs attention to systems of social relationships whose participants, performing actions and responding to each other's actions, live in a moral order. In this analytic frame we can make contact with concepts of the person used in other societies and notice their connections with social structures. Local concepts of the person as agent-in-society plainly are not co-extensive with local concepts of normal human individuals and their capacities for behavior. Many but not all of the doings of persons, when approached from within their society, reveal themselves as actions. In an ongoing sociomoral order movements and vocalizings are constantly subjected to a public process of construal. There is a process of analyzing, interpreting, and labeling of conduct so as to generate a stream of public discourse about agency and non-agency. Construal is carried out according to culture-specific criteria of logic, factuality, standards of evidence, values, and labels, that is, to rules in a very broad sense. In this context, issues of conformity to, transgression of, and manipulation of rules are of less interest than the fact that members of the society construe stretches of conduct as constituting specific actions or non-actions. That is why anthropologists must take note of local rules (1) differentiating between sorts of actions, such as "borrowing" versus "theft," or "marrying" versus "taking a concubine," and (2) distinguishing actions from mere behavior, as a priest's gesture of blessing versus an infant's random wave of the hand. Carrying out mutual construals within a local way of life, members of a society construct some but not all of their number as agents-in-society, as persons.

In trying to disambiguate person in anthropological analysis, I have implied that it can be used to do justice to a local "insider" concept in any society, and that it has theoretically informed validity as well. It is indeed my view that all societies employ a concept of the living human as agent-in-society; use of such a concept is intrinsic to the arrangements we call societies. Moreover, common features in concepts of the person are entailed logically and otherwise. Thus, the person is universally assigned some measure of freedom to choose among possible lines of action. The measure of freedom may be small. But if members of a society viewed all humans as automatons, they would not consider anyone an agent: "person" and "mechanism" are contradictory concepts. The person whose actions are assumed to be purposive is also universally one held to be rightly accountable for those actions. Certainly that does not mean that people everywhere impute to each other a sense of responsibility. The emphasis, as with construals, must be on the shared, public aspect of accountability, which means being liable to sanctions. Accountability and liability, like mutual construal, show the person as agent within a sociomoral order. Any system of legal or jural concepts, rules, and procedures provides relevant evidence.

Is there something about the person that identifies him or her as such apart from single bits of conduct construed as actions? Yes. That something is a roster of interconnected agentive capacities supposed to characterize a person or class of persons. This is a key point, for a large part of the description and comparison of concepts of the person must focus on publicly bestowed, imputed, and enunciated agentive capacities of persons, and on the relations among those capacities.
Personhood has a temporal dimension. Everyone has a biography that, matched to local expectations, follows an overall trajectory as it becomes a moral career (see Goffman 1961:127; Harris 1978:49-77). Moving through the moral career, the human being may or may not become fully a person. Even if he or she does become a person, personhood may be partly or fully rescinded later. His or her agentive capacities are bestowed or removed, confirmed or disconfirmed, declared or denied. For example, in some systems of slavery, enslavement could mean drastic diminution in personhood; so also with extreme forms of incarceration, as in Nazi concentration camps and in the Gulag. Personhood can, furthermore, be situationally contextualized, as where low-status sub-societies have their own social order encapsulated in the wider one. Isolation of the relevant social contexts from each other facilitates the formation and use of the differing concepts of the person.

Two interconnected approaches can reveal the nature of agentive capacities and make for more readily comparable accounts of personhood as both structural and processual. One approach looks at the array of social kinds recognized in the society. The other looks at the pattern of social life cycles as moral careers by which socially identified humans are brought to end points differing for the various social kinds.

The first approach, through social kinds, attends not so much to separate social statuses as to those summative social identities by means of which members of the society group together and label clusters of social properties. Thus in the United States, “housewife” is more than the name of a domestic role, as “professional person” is more than an occupational one. Among the Taita, “male elder” named not merely a position in the age-status system but an identity summative of a number of statuses and social differentiae in the domestic, politico-jural, and economic domains. Attention to such identities can show how members of various social kinds are reckoned to have differing agentive capacities and hence to be unlike each other as authors of actions. Members of the society are likely to see some of those capacities as natural, perhaps body-based, perhaps divinely ordained. Observation notes that for someone to “count” as a possessor of allegedly natural capacities requires sociocultural measures; that is, entering a highly valued social kind cannot be a bootstrap achievement by anyone, given that social validation is required. Continuation in the kind also depends on sociocultural processes.

The second approach, by way of social life-cycles, can show how differing agentive capacities come to be imputed to, bestowed on, enunciated, or withdrawn from named humans as they enter and leave various social kinds. We can thereby see how local assumptions about purposiveness and accountability are treated in relation to locally situated biographies.

There is one especially important aspect of the relation between social kinds and social life-cycles. It is that humans as sociocultural beings incorporate the structural features of their society as it is locally alleged to persist from the past and will supposedly persist in the future. As someone lives through a finite career, he or she comes to encapsulate, through both membership in social kinds and social life-cycle phases, features of the society’s self-reproduction and self-representation. He or she can be seen both as a microcosm of the contemporary social order and as an embodiment of large-scale processes and quasi-history (i.e., structural time). The various ways in which that happens are likely to differentiate among people in terms of imputed agentive capacities or the alleged promise of them. Here the outside observer needs to know which social kinds are seen locally as bearers of continuity in politico-jural processes and which are not. (Needless to say, these social kinds may in actuality not turn out to embody continuity, given that social change may intervene.)

Agency and Action in the Process of Construal

I turn now to the basis on which conduct is construed either as action or else as mere behavior. Analysis shows that relevant processes center everywhere on the imputation to
people of three sorts of agentive capacities, with social kinds and life-cycle figuring in the imputations. I distinguish the three sorts as follows: judgmental capacities, capacities of social entitlement, and mystical capacities. Imputed to people of particular social kinds, they mark those people as persons, as agents-in-society. Imputing to people the absence of capacities renders them lesser persons, non-persons, or former persons. (By agentive capacity I do not mean some alleged generalized "power" that, perhaps, can be "recycled" in sacrifice by, for example, killing an enemy. Agentive capacities may or may not be associated with access to such "power.")

By judgmental capacities I mean the locally assumed, imputed capacities to embody in conduct the local standards of logicality, factuality, propriety, and morality. I do not mean that people supposed to have judgmental capacities are necessarily "intelligent," nor are they thought to act in such a way that their utterances are always logical and true, their conduct proper, and so on. Rather, someone supposed to have judgmental capacities is considered capable of submitting his or her conduct as well as that of others to shared standards and values, and is capable of making appropriate decisions and morally right choices. That one might do otherwise shows that one sometimes makes mistakes, lies, acts rudely, cheats, perhaps even commits sorcery. Being held capable of doing the right thing, the supposed possessor of judgmental capacities can be held accountable and subjected to sanctions (see Morris 1976:31-73). Judgmental capacities need not be considered after the psychologistic formulations of contemporary American society. Among the Taita, for example, dispositional formulations treated all humans past infancy as capable of feeling anger. But social growth within the nuclear family transformed the mere inner experience of the self into a jurally and morally patterned capacity, publicly recognized, to affect the well-being of kin through anger and its public casting-out. This judgmental capacity was an important property of the Taita human growing in personhood. As such it was subject to public sanctions.

By social entitlement capacities I mean the capacity to embody in one's conduct the rights, duties, freedoms, and constraints of specific social roles. Considering social kinds and the social life-cycle, we see that in any society people acquire over time one or another bundle of social credits and deficits that they carry selectively into various situations and contexts. Considering agency, we see that members of a society impute to each other the capacities of social kinds such as "housewife," "professional person," "male elder," and so on. More commonly, we take for granted the ways in which people actively proclaim each other's social entitlement capacities by a variety of means, such as naming and labeling with kinship terms, caste names, the titles of craft or ritual specialties, rank, and so on. There is also the transformation of people implicitly or explicitly through forms of passage rites into the specific roles that assume rights and duties.

If we were to think of the acquisition of social entitlement capacities as a purely quantitative, additive matter, we would have to conclude that the more roles someone acquires in the course of a lifetime, the more agentive capacities are possessed and the greater is the named human's personhood, a ridiculous notion. It is the conventional bundling together of roles into explicit or implicit social kinds that is important here, for the social kinds represent the various modes of encapsulating the social structure and cultural values in social beings. One aspect is the apportionment of clusters of entitlements and negative entitlements that are claimed to go together naturally. It may be said, for example, that for the gender that muds house frames it is "natural" to be the potters even though the techniques are quite different, or that those who hunt are the "obvious" ones to thatch, or that those who collect garbage could not be adequate temple attendants. Another aspect is the differential evaluation of those clusters overall. Hence, though the people who belong to some social kinds may well look less active than others, it is imputed to them (and claimed by them) that they have more of "what it takes" than others, that they are possessed of greater agentive capacities. At this point one touches on (among other things) cultural definitions of work of various kinds and on the alleged qualifications for kinds of work and the rewards they should carry.
By mystical capacities I mean alleged capacities that are ordinarily hidden from day-to-day processes of construal, capacities recognized and properly assessed by special means such as divination, I.Q. testing, and so on. Assumed to exist but to be closed to recognition in ordinary ways, examples include various capacities for openness to the divine as seen in mediums and seers, saintliness, or charismatic gifts; profound wisdom; possession of an immortal soul; and intelligence and motivation. The extent to which mystical capacities are in a specific society actually counted among the capacities of persons as agents-in-society depends partly on the connections made locally between judgmental capacities, social entitlement capacities, and mystical capacities. Thus, if slaves are alleged to have immortal souls but are treated by non-slaves as thing-like entities without judgmental capacities, their souls are made socially irrelevant. Again, charismatic gifts such as mediumship require public social validation to function as agentive capacities (see Fry 1976; Lan 1985). So does sainthood, as witness rites of canonization and glorification. Finally, some mystical capacities function as the obverse of normal social entitlement capacities and perhaps even of judgmental capacities; such are the distinguishing qualities of the Hindu sannyasi and of the Holy Fool (see Carter 1982:140; Ware 1964:118).

In asking about the nature and allocation of agentive capacities, then, we ask what social kinds have what capacities to act and how people gain or lose capacities over the life course. We can turn things around and ask how stretches of conduct are or are not construed as actions of certain kinds depending on who the performer is. In this context we have to take largely as given the cultural forms used locally in making interpretations. A full general account of the social process of interpreting conduct would call upon and extend the notion of performative utterance, a task I have done elsewhere for Taita ritual actions (Harris 1978:139–142). J. L. Austin, in formulating the status of certain kinds of utterances as actions, points out that the utterances must meet specifiable conditions in order to be actions; for example, an utterance can be truly a command only if, among other things, it is issued by someone socially empowered to issue such commands. The sentencing by a judge and the proclaiming of a marriage by clergy are other speech acts requiring specific social entitlements (Austin 1962:14–24; see also Feld 1962). If we treat all of social interaction as involving mutual construal, we see that the agentive capacities imputed to persons are essential conditions enabling specific stretches of conduct to be defined and labeled as actions of certain kinds. Ultimately, we can see that the agentive capacities imputed to full, elaborated persons yield their power to recreate and perhaps to change the very action system that gives them their social being.

Some Analytic Issues

That concepts of self and person attend to distinct yet related matters, defining and connecting different but related data, can be seen in what Goffman has called "total institutions" (Goffman 1961:xiii). In concentration camps, maximum security prisons, restricted wards in mental hospitals, and the like, prisoners, inmates, or patients may undergo daily and progressive public disconfirmation as agents. That people's movements and choices are restricted is only one important aspect among many. In extreme cases their captors, guards, or therapists maintain a sociomoral system denying that they are capable of being genuine agents. Declared within the institution to be non-persons, they may find that their movements and utterances there are denied the status of actions. Since what they say and do is defined as mere behavior, they must be, so it is pronounced, without agentive capacities, whatever legal rights of appeal they may retain in the wider social order. The point is that we can ask what are the variable fates of selfhood experienced by people undergoing similar depersonalization. Extreme situations, indeed, provide some of the clearest evidence that we need to distinguish self from person and both from individual. None of the three concepts is inherently residual relative to the other two. However, a focus on any one of them calls forth a descriptive and analytic orientation toward the others.
The difficulties created by conflating related concepts have been pointed out by Fogelson in a paper surveying a large number of studies of person, self, and “identity” (Fogelson 1982). Since his account is historically directed and organized, he must perform move back and forth between sociologistic and psychologistic orientations in order to do justice to the varied works treated. Himself most at home among concepts of self, Fogelson is more optimistic than I am about the possibility of converging analytical approaches.

In another paper, Shweder and Bourne (1984) assert that there are two principal concepts of the person related to two conceptualizations of the individual-social relationship. In modern Western societies the individual-social relationship is seen as “egocentric contractual.” The corresponding concept of the “person” allows the latter to be treated as independent of social context, as the possessor of qualities indigenously describable in abstract terms. Many other societies conceptualize the individual-social relationship as “socio-centric organic.” Living by a “holistic world view,” such societies hold that “objects and events are necessarily altered by the relations into which they enter . . .” Correspondingly, the “person” is conceptualized as context-dependent, his characteristics describable only by specifying the social context in which they appear (Shweder and Bourne 1984: 193).

The trouble is that Shweder and Bourne, misformulating their problem, ignore critical social structural differences between their supposedly paradigmatic cases, the Oriya of India and a small population of associates in the United States. They are not really pursuing concepts of the person, but ideas about selves as read by others. Moving among the terms “person,” “self,” “individual,” “man,” and even “personality,” they evince their own psychologistic approach.

Unfortunately, Shweder and Bourne refuse to consider the significance of some of their own data. Among Oriya, people apparently belong not to closed communities but to closed social networks. The Americans they deal with are, by contrast, enmeshed in a system of open, widely ramifying, partly or wholly unconnected networks. The different readings of selves in the two cases suggests to me that in societies like that of Oriya, structural features cause the concept of self to be subordinated to and shaped by the concept of person. For Americans, selves tend to be treated as the only enduring elements in shifting social contexts. The result, I hold, in the latter case is subordination of the concept of person to that of self: agency-in-society is subordinated conceptually to subjectivity.

Certainly there is a working concept of the person among Americans (more than one, in fact), but it is shaped by a psychologistic concern with the self. That Shweder and Bourne do not consider such matters is not surprising. Their paper is situated within the amalgam of psychological and symbolic anthropologies so prominent currently in the United States. The resulting combination of insights and obscurities calls for attention to one source of recurrent problems for all of us: individual, self, and person can stand for both “native” concepts and observers’ constructs.

On the “native” side, it is extremely doubtful that any human society lacks working cultural constructs of human beings as members of a human kind, as loci of experience, and as agents-in-society. We should be able to identify and distinguish the three concepts ethnomorphyically, expecting to find them linked to a greater or lesser extent and in different ways, while they may be split or lumped terminologically in the indigenous lexicon. Local concepts of the human individual will be seen to be part of a local body of biologistic thought and practice that connects humans with other living entities in the universe and perhaps with non-personal processes and “forces.” Similarly, views of what it is like to be human selves—the positing of humans as centers of experience—will be found to be part of a local repertoire of psychologistic thought and practice. Concepts of human beings as authors of action, persons, will be found within a local body of sociologistic thought and practice that articulates the social structure with day-to-day interactions and with social biographies. Situated at the intersection of the politico-jural, familial, ritual-moral, and other domains of the social order, the person as a local social and cul-
tural construct also articulates those domains with each other (see Fortes 1969:95–99). Concepts of non-human persons and/or person-like entities articulate the social order with the metaphysical order.

As I have suggested, concepts of individual, self, and person are not insulated from one another. There can be hierarchical relationships among them in particular cases. Further, social and cultural changes produce new formulations. For example, among the Taita during the early fifties, some young men who had learned about germs at school scoffed at the formulations central to the older concepts of individual, self, and person. Their own conceptualizations were moving in the direction of materialist reductionism, while American concepts were becoming more and more psychologized. For Western societies in general, we know by now that changes in thought respond to social changes, with one important result being shifts in the conceptualizations of human beings. The rise and appeal of sociobiology and decision theory, Piagetian developmentalism, and the earlier heyday of behaviorism provide cases in point (see Harré 1984:222–235; Taylor 1985:4–8).

I have written so far as though any given society displays only one set of concepts of individual, self, and person, allowing for some dissent and for intimations of change. But that is patently not the case for societies that are internally differentiated socially and culturally, where bodies of specialist knowledge coexist in mutual influence with popular conceptualizations, and where the social domains are relatively numerous and, while interpenetrating, to some degree autonomous. So in the contemporary United States, ideas and actions entering into major public controversies show that there are differing, competing conceptualizations of individual, self, and person. On the public scene we see also the importance of differential authority and political power in the underwriting of various conceptualizations. Controversies over civil rights, abortion, new reproductive technologies, and refusal to receive medical treatment involve political struggles over whose conceptualizations will be upheld in law. On one hand, defining the person as having several kinds of agentive capacities is partly at odds with Christian (especially Orthodox and Roman Catholic) views in which the mystical capacities dominate and define the others. Legal conceptualizations, on the other hand, make social entitlement capacities dominant. (For consequent problems in ethical and political life see Barron 1983; Engelhardt 1975; Pilpel 1983.)

Distinguishing among concepts of individual, self, and person, then, can clarify ethnographic accounts, single-case analysis, and cross-society comparison. Such clarity can enable anthropologists to look at the interconnections among the concepts in particular societies and study the effects of social and cultural changes on modes of conceptualizing human beings.

On the side of anthropological observers, issues arise from the fact that one or another concept inevitably has privileged status in one or another kind of analytic enterprise. This is so despite the attractions of claiming that anthropology is one, for it does not profit us to ignore consequential differences among our varying problems, methods, data, and theories. In one kind of anthropology, a focus on *individuals* as members of aggregates of human organisms directs attention to society seen as a collectivity. The features of the collectivity are seen concomitantly as resulting from the mutual bombardment of supposedly natural atomistic units, that is, of human beings as a certain sort of psychobiological entity. Culture tends to become a resource available to the human units to alter the pattern of bombardments and to bind the units together in larger and larger collectivities. To focus on *selves* is to formulate questions and to direct observation with reference to posited intrapsychic structures and processes. Social structure is, as it were, taken “inside” the experiencing selves. Cultural formulations are treated as a source of goals, ideals, problems, ideas, concepts, and beliefs incorporated by selves, and as defining the contexts for the self’s growth, development, expression, and reading by others. To focus on *persons* as agents-in-society brings properties of the social order and its cultural forms to the center of attention, for these are seen as constitutive of human agency as a public
fact. Used as theoretical terms in social anthropology, person and social system form a set, eliminating the possibility of dealing with societies as agglomerations of particles or as theaters for the casting, deployment, and review of selves.

One suspects that some of the terminological ambiguities in various anthropological studies of concepts of individual, self, or person are symptomatic of unsettled orientations, perhaps of slippings between theoretical stances. Be that as it may, major cleavages in American anthropology follow the lines of differentiation sketched above. One result lies in the very different links between the various sorts of anthropology on the one hand, and non-anthropological fields on the other. For all sorts of anthropology, there is a pressing need to deal with what is a confusion of concepts, not merely of terminology. Clarification can enable us to make better use of ethnographic resources and contribute more profitably to cross-disciplinary efforts than we have done so far.

Notes

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1Mauss 1950[1980] continues to be cited as a foundation for studies of concepts of the person. Yet, as noted by Allen, Mauss’s paper is ambiguous: “However, by the end of the essay the sociological notion of the person is well on the way towards identification with the psychological, and the relationship between the two could be explored at any point in their history” (Allen 1985:35). Krader’s earlier paper also takes account of ambiguities in Mauss, concluding that Mauss contributed most to “the etiology of the concept of the person as a scientific instrument in relation to its derivation in Western moral, legal, and ontological traditions” (Krader 1968:488). Ethnographically focused studies include but are not limited to Carter (1982), Fortes (1987), Geertz (1973), Gewirtz (1984), Hallowell (1963, 1976[1960]), Kirkpatrick (1983), Leenhardt (1979), Lienhardt (1985), Middleton (1973), and Read (1955). Poole (1982) uses the distinctions made by Harris (1980) and in the present article. Other partially relevant papers appear in collections such as Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes (1985) and Östör, Fruzzetti, and Barnett (1982). I have benefited especially from reading LaFontaine (1985).

Strathern (1979) deals explicitly with concepts of the self, as do papers in collections such as Bruner (1983), Heelas and Lock (1981), Lee (1982), Marsella, DeVos, and Hsu (1985), and White and Kirkpatrick (1985). The anthropological literature on self is in fact far too voluminous to cite here; it includes a large number of papers in many years’ volumes of Ethos.

2Geertz (1973:6–7) plays on the difference between a meaning-laden “wink” and a mere eye-blink. This involves, in my terms, distinguishing between an action and an item of behavior.

In this context a variety of Orthodox icon of St. Mark is interesting. The saint, by tradition the apostle to distant peoples, is shown talking with a dog-headed man. The latter, so the icon conveys, must be an inhabitant of an exceedingly remote land. The idea was common in the Greco-Roman world that increasing distance from the “center” might well be matched by increasing difference in customs and even bodily form.


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