University of Groningen

Human Essence in Conclusion

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Published in:
The Oxford Handbook of the Human Essence

DOI:
[10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190247577.013.21](https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190247577.013.21)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2018

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Zomeren, M., & Dovidio, J. F. (2018). Human Essence in Conclusion: Why Psychology Needs a Bigger Picture and Some Suggestions on How to Get There. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Human Essence* Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190247577.013.21>

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Human Essence in Conclusion: Why Psychology Needs a Bigger Picture and Some Suggestions on How to Get There

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The Oxford Handbook of the Human Essence

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Print Publication Date: Jan 2018 Subject: Psychology, Social Psychology

Online Publication Date: Nov 2017 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190247577.013.21

Abstract and Keywords

This chapter asks what the absence of scholarly consensus on the human essence, as illustrated by the many different contributions to this volume, can tell us about the state of psychology and about psychologists in general. Furthermore, it asks how we may be able to move toward such a consensus. It first reviews the different essences (and thus theoretical lenses) in the contributions to each section of this volume, which revolve around the themes of individuality, sociality, and cultural embeddedness. The chapter then outlines what the state of the field signals about the value of broader theorizing, and what changes would be needed in the broader system in order to move from the current fragmented view of human essence toward a truly integrated view. Finally, it considers the question of whether one existing broad and potentially integrative theory—Charles Darwin's theory of evolution—can serve to connect views of the human essence in terms of individuality, sociality, and cultural embeddedness.

Keywords: individuality, sociality, cultural embeddedness, evolution, existentialism, motivation, self, theory, human essence, morality

One might perhaps expect that a concluding chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of the Human Essence* would provide a sound, simple, and straightforward answer on what the human essence is, based on the many interesting and diverse social and psychological contributions to the volume. Indeed, one might expect that if a field like psychology had a strong consensus about what the human essence is, then it would be shared among the social and psychological contributions in this volume. Thus, it would not be too difficult to come up with such a sound, simple, and straightforward definition of the human essence.

Alas, we need to engage in some expectation management here. In this concluding chapter, we will *not* provide a sound, simple, and straightforward answer to the question of human essence. The main reason for this is that psychology does *not* have consensus about the human essence. This is in fact why the contributions to this volume are so diverse in what they consider the human essence—a diversity that indicates a rich potential of

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ideas, but also a clear need for a broader overarching perspective. Furthermore, it is precisely this lack of bigger pictures that makes asking the question about the human essence essential for the (p. 276) field. In social psychology in particular, there is an abundance of theories and models, but there is no unifying theory on what people are like. Understanding the human essence would represent a key element of such a unifying theory because it shapes foundational assumptions about why, how, and when people do the things that they do. It is clear from this volume that this field lacks a view of human essence that is shared amongst scholars.

In this concluding chapter, we identify this absence of and argue for the need for such a shared view on the human essence. We further ask what this diverse set of views on the human essence can tell us about psychology and about psychologists in general. Indeed, if these many theoretical views reflect the different lenses of a camera, as suggested by Van Zomeren (this volume), then what does this tell us about scholars of human behavior—the photographers behind the lens? What can they change about themselves that would lead them toward valuing theoretical integration more?

First of all, we believe that the contributions to this volume jointly showcase an undiscovered country of views on the human essence and some common themes (our individuality, sociality, and cultural embeddedness) that may serve as a roadmap toward a more theoretically integrative view on it. Second, if scholars of human behavior want to realize this rich potential, then we believe that they need to change their habits and identity, for instance through incorporating courses in our curricula about integrative theorizing and critical thinking. At present, the broader academic system rewards these photographers behind the lens for taking many pictures through the very same lens. Ideally, the system should also encourage switching lenses in order to see the bigger picture. But, of course, it is these scholars who are the system. So if scholars change, the system changes. This is why changing scholarly habits and identity is an important first step to take.

We first review the different essences and lenses in the contributions to each section of this volume. We then outline what we believe the state of the field signals and what changes would be needed. Finally, we raise the question whether one existing broad and potentially integrative theory—Darwin's (1859) theory of evolution—can serve to connect views of the human essence in terms of the three themes we identified in the contributions to this volume (individuality, sociality, and cultural embeddedness).

Different Essences, Different Lenses

In this first section, we revisit the three aims of the volume and review them in light of the many interesting contributions to this issue. The first aim was to showcase the diversity in theoretical perspectives in (particularly social) psychology; the second to raise the question of why it is important to ask bigger-picture questions such as about the human essence; and the third was to suggest a basic organizational structure—revolving around human essence as *individuality*, *sociality*, and *cultural embeddedness*—that would reflect

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different theoretical lenses typically used in the field and thus serve as a roadmap toward theoretical integration. We discuss each aim in turn.

Diversity in perspectives.

The first aim of this volume was to acknowledge the diversity in theoretical perspectives in social psychology—an aim that, at least to some degree, we feel we have achieved. By asking scholars to identify the human essence, across the chapters in this volume we have seen a multitude of essences, (p. 277) sometimes residing in the body (e.g., IJzerman & Hogezeil, this volume), sometimes in the mind (e.g., Gregg & Sedikides, this volume), sometimes in relationships (e.g., Tyler, this volume), and sometimes in cultural surroundings and interaction (e.g., Cieciuch & Schwartz, this volume; Kashima, this volume). For sure, whatever human essence there is to be found in psychology, it is not monolithic. And it does not need to be: It is the connections between these many essences that the field is lacking.

We do not claim that we managed to provide a representative list of all theoretical perspectives in psychology. Such a claim would be unrealistic in many ways, not least of all our ability to persuade psychologists from all its subfields to contribute their valuable time and effort to this handbook. We did manage, we feel, to achieve a representative bandwidth, with examples ranging from foci on individuals bodies and minds to foci on how we coordinate and relate to other people and on how culture and cultural meaning embed us in political societies, as well as the values, relationships, and social interactions that come with it. In order to achieve this bandwidth, however, many contributors are psychologists who are interested in human behavior in the social sphere. Nevertheless, their definition of “social” is remarkably different across the contributions. As such, this handbook offers a rich and diverse, yet also necessarily incomplete, picture of psychology’s quest for the human essence.

Asking bigger-picture questions.

The second aim of the volume was to raise the question of why it is important to ask bigger-picture questions such as about the human essence. The field of psychology has recently been tried and tested to come up with sustainable standards for *empirical* rigor and practice (e.g., Nosek, Spies & Motyl, 2012), but empirical data unfortunately mean little without shared and solid frameworks that enable their interpretation (Van Zomeren, 2016). Now, if our interpretative frameworks are already so different, as the contributions to this volume attest, then why do we assume that our *methods* and *statistics* will enable us to see the same thing through very different lenses of the camera? Obviously, it is important for any lens to be calibrated well—but calibrating one lens will not tell us much about which other lenses may be available and important and what we would see if we switched them for a moment. More data, or even higher quality and more replicable data, will not solve a lack of theoretical integration in the field. Indeed, one reason for why it is important to ask psychologists for their view on the human essence is to side-track these methods for a moment and think about and reflect on the lenses scholars use. In fact,

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without a lens and scholars behind the camera taking the picture, there is no meaningful picture to take.

As such, we believe it is important that scholars make explicit their theoretical assumptions about the human essence, that is, their assumptions and theories about what makes people tick. Only if scholars know themselves, as interpreters, and know the lens used to take the picture, will they be able to meaningfully interpret what they observe. A good example of this is Sullivan and Palitsky's (this volume) contribution on existential motives that link people with their social system. In their contribution, an existentialist view on human essence views depression as part of a "natural" process of getting to grips with existential fears. By contrast, a more individualistic view on human essence leads to the set of criteria outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed., DSM-5, 2013) that is (p. 278) used to categorize individuals as clinically depressed. Whatever one's assumptions are about depression, it is helpful to make those explicit, as this will help communicating a view on the human essence that is essential to the interpretation of one's findings.

A potential structure for integration.

The third and final aim of the volume was to outline an organizational structure in the contributions, as manifested in the three subsections entitled *Individuality*, *Sociality*, and *Cultural Embeddedness*. After all, a broad diversity of theoretical perspectives does not mean complete randomness (Van Zomeren, 2016). Although some may disagree (see Gergen's contribution), we do believe that the structure that divides the volume into three sections is meaningful and important, because it reflects some of the very different theoretical lenses used in our diverse field. For this reason, we felt that the discussant chapters were an important addition to the volume, because these contributions would be able to take a broad and potentially integrative view while trying to identify the essence of each section, so to speak.

Specifically, the first discussant chapter by Van Zomeren (this volume), for instance, discussed the *portrait lens* of the contributions in the first section on individuality, which locates the human essence in the individual body, mind, and/or brain. Giner-Sorolla (this volume), in the second discussant chapter, considered the *wide angle* lens of the second section on sociality and points to the importance of relational and group life across all contributions in this section. Finally, Fischer (this volume) discussed the third section on cultural embeddedness in terms of an *ultra-wide* angle lens, which reflects a broad cultural-evolutionary perspective on the human essence. This organizational structure is important because it helps scholars think about the connections between the sections.

It may not be a coincidence that many contributions hint at evolutionary processes (for instance by focusing on what makes humans unique compared to animals), or at least use language that is often attributed to evolutionary thinking (e.g., adaptive, selected, and so on). Baumeister's (this volume) contribution on free will, for example, assumes an evolutionary advantage of this phenomenon, and so does Gregg and Sedikides' (this volume)

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contribution about self-evaluation. These are, to say the very least, three different types of lenses used in the field, even though certainly not all scholars use all of them. But perhaps we should start to learn using them and even try to switch lenses, in order to move closer to a bigger-picture theory.

Graziano and Schroeder (this volume), for example, develop a view of pro-social behavior as part of the human essence by analyzing micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of such behavior, which correspond to perspective taking, relationship dynamics, and evolutionary processes that help to understand why human beings engage in pro-social behavior so much. Nadler's (this volume) contribution is intriguing here as he points to psychological factors that make us resist being helped. Similarly, Vandello and Puryear's (this volume) contribution zooms in on aggression as part of the human essence by providing comparisons between aggression rates across cultures, which is quite a different way of thinking broadly about a phenomenon that seems, at first glance, to indicate the very opposite of Graziano and Schroeder's (this volume) focus on pro-social behavior. Furthermore, Tyler (this volume) discusses the importance of justice as part of the human essence and links its psychological experience to the behavior of institutions, (p. 279) which also broadens the scope of the phenomenon.

These are all baby steps toward broad *theoretical integration*—the motivation and ability to take a helicopter view and to learn from what one sees by incorporating this into one's theorizing and thus theories. In order to invite such a perspective, bigger-picture questions such as about the human essence are very important to ask—even if one knows in advance that there may not be straightforward answers in the short run. Yet it sparks the imagination and curiosity about a bigger picture, such as when asking how the human essence can include *both* pro-social behavior and aggression. In fact, Fiske and Rai (2014) recently suggested a solution for this paradox by offering a broad theory that views aggression and pro-social behavior as ways to regulate relationships. Van Zomeren (2016) took this perspective one step further by suggesting in his *selvations theory* that if relationship regulation is a central part of the human essence, then we should be able to identify core psychological mechanisms (called *selvations*) that reflect this fundamental process. Specifically, this theory suggests that human beings should be hypersensitive to perceived or imagined changes in one's network of relationships, which provide the trigger for motivated responses to this threat or challenge to their relational essence. Depending on cultural rules and praxis of how to regulate relationships in a given context, the behavioral outcome can be either aggressive or prosocial, yet both reflect ways of regulating the relationship under threat or challenge.

Of course, a focus on theoretical integration and on switching theoretical lenses does not imply that single theoretical lenses are without value. Clearly, it is important to focus and sharpen any lens through systematic empirical observations, be they confirmatory or exploratory. But that is just the basis: Single theories and lenses should not be the end game. For instance, Cornwell and Higgins' (this volume) contribution focus on the organization of goal pursuit within the individual mind by offering an analysis of multiple motives (value, control, and truth). Similarly, Ellemers' (this volume) contribution zooms in

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morality and how this is grounded in people's group identities. Both contributions are based in excellent lines of empirical work that have calibrated the authors' theoretical lenses on these topics. As such, they provide a good basis to ask broader and theoretically integrative questions, such as: Where lies the moral aspect in Cornwell and Higgins' (this volume) analysis, and how do the motives identified by them as part of the human essence affect Ellemers' (this volume) analysis of morality grounded in group life?

Theoretical integration does not just mean combining different theories. Sometimes the challenges are difficult, such as when scholars question the generalizability of claims about human essence. For instance, Reicher's (this volume) contribution warns of the oppressive potential in the use of a notion of human essence, not unlike Adams et al.'s (this volume) contribution on the importance of the "decolonization of the mind" in order to be able to make claims about essence. The underlying concern here is whether claims about any human essence are warranted, and what potential pitfalls of such claims can be. Cultural differences, for instance, seem important in considering the human essence (e.g., as children of God, or as descendants of other animals), as much as different political systems may relate (p. 280) to different understandings of the human essence (e.g., as self-interested individuals, or communal comrades).

However, this does not necessarily lead to a rejection of actual human essence (which follows from Gergen's [this volume] argument), because Kashima's (this volume) contribution, for example, suggests that the very question of the human essence, and our need to talk about it, may be part of the human essence. Similarly, Cieciuch and Schwartz' (this volume) contribution identifies cross-national differences in what people value, but at the same time impose a universal structure on their list of values. Furthermore, Klandermans' (this volume) contribution points, in line with Reicher's (this volume) contribution, to the political animals that human beings are and how they seek to change the broader system they are embedded in.

Indeed, at the broadest level, the different themes of the three sections in this volume raise essential questions about the human essence, such as: How do individuality and sociality go hand in hand? If cultural embeddedness is so essential, then how can scholars think about the human essence without connecting culture to sociality and to individuality? Those are exactly the questions we believe scholars should think about more in our field in order to develop a bigger picture on the basis of theoretical integration.

The Photographer Behind the Camera

In the previous sections, we have been talking about scholars as the photographers behind the different theoretical lenses in their field. But why do they prefer to stick with one lens? In this section, we observe that the current academic system rewards doing this, which shapes scholars' habits and identity as psychologists. As these incentives, habits and identities typically work against changes in the broader system, in this case it effectively works against the development of broader and integrative theories and thus ultimately against at least some shared view of human essence in psychology. We further

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suggest that because scholars are the system, changing their own habits and identity as psychologists effectively changes the system toward a point where theoretical integration and asking bigger-picture questions will be rewarded as much as empirical research.

Habits and identity.

Who chooses the theoretical lens that scholars use in their research? Although one may expect that the straightforward answer should be “scholars themselves,” many times they simply use a particular lens out of *habit*, for instance because they are trained in using this one lens. For example, those relying on brain scans and measures of physiology require a portrait lens (if not a microscope), whereas those relying on large cross-cultural survey databases require an ultra-wide angle lens (if not a telescope) on their cameras. Scholars typically use what they have been trained to work with in their research, which is precisely what the system rewards and thus encourages. Psychological scholars are trained to be specialists, not generalists (Kruglanski, 2001).

The system further rewards self-selection mechanisms, both in terms of who scholars choose to study in their research (e.g., Western student samples; Henrich, Norenzayan & Heine, 2010) and what they study (those issues fitting the liberal values that academics have, be they scholars or students; Duarte, Crawford, Stern, Haidt, Jussim, & Tetlock, 2015). Such self-selective mechanisms cater to the often-heard quote that psychological “re-search is me-search,” and therefore, given that who they are is not representative of the general (p. 281) population, our collective database cannot necessarily be generalized to other samples and cultures.

Furthermore, scholars’ values and assumptions about the human essence affect what kind of methods and analyses they choose to answer them. Few in the field, for instance, may be enthusiastic about identifying the genes that indicate what makes people morally good or bad. This is because such a question would not match common assumptions in the field about the human essence (and note that this becomes visible precisely when such questions are asked). As such, the system seems to reward what provides scholars with rather limited views on human beings in their social world, and it does so by training scholars into habits that sustain the system. Asking bigger-picture questions such as about the human essence does not fit and thus is not rewarded.

In addition to these habits that reinforce self-selection mechanisms, psychologists seem to be in a, seemingly eternal (e.g., Gergen, 1973; McGuire, 1973), state of identity crisis. Psychologists do quantitative but also qualitative research, they use experimental but also cross-sectional data, they are interested in moderators as well as mediators of certain effects or relationships. Psychologists can be found at the buttons of the laboratory and of fMRI scanners, but also in the various fields that includes topics as helping, aggression, resisting temptation, attitude formation, value protection, and so on. Thus, psychologists can be found studying people in political contexts, cultural contexts, close relationships, or in small cubicles behind a computer where people are asked to press a key in response

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to an almost invisible stimulus. They are all over the place, which is never a good place to be for someone in search of a clear identity.

Indeed, psychology is uniquely positioned within, or torn between, the broader family tree of natural and social sciences. On the one hand, psychologists tend toward the experimental and “hard sciences,” assuming a material world in which human beings are but more complex manifestations of the same principles that govern other entities and bodies. As such they assume universal laws and principles that scholars can know and identify. On the other hand, many psychologists conduct studies that are necessarily embedded in clear political and cultural contexts that shape laws and principles that otherwise may appear to be universal. In fact, some would go as far as suggesting that these laws and principles cannot be known and identified, which pretty much erases the boundaries between the arts and sciences. Whether one likes it or not, and whether one is on one side or the other, psychologists dwell in a field where there is such diversity in such basic assumptions about the pictures they take, the lenses they use, and what their own eyes want them to see, that any hint of human essence may indeed appear elusive. So what can we, as scholars, do to change this state of affairs, especially if the problem is embedded in a broader system that rewards the very habit we may want to break?

Toward change.

If this broad-stroke portrait of the photographer behind the lens tells us anything, then it is that psychologists need to change some of their habits and try to cherish the complex identity they have as psychologists. The first habit in need of change is that psychologists do not seem to structurally value and practice theoretical lens-switching. That is, theoretical articles are not considered equal status in the field as empirical journal articles, which in practice means it makes more sense to spend time, money, effort and (p. 282) other resources on doing more studies in a systematic way (thus, without switching lenses), than to take a broader approach. The second habit is that they do not seem to structurally value and practice integrative theorizing and asking bigger-picture questions. That is, typical introductions of empirical journal articles are focused on quickly getting to the studies testing a focused hypothesis and discuss what they show (which is not helped by the word limits for an article set by certain journals), rather than develop different perspectives that would generate multiple and quite different hypotheses (McGuire, 1973).

Fortunately, several tools are available and at one’s disposal to break with those habits. A first tool toward this end is to structurally incorporate courses in curricula about *critical thinking*, independent of specific content that may introduce bias (e.g., Slife & Williams, 1995). Critical thinking is a skill that can be learned through training and forces students and scholars to ponder the bigger-picture questions such as what is the human essence. As such, it helps to break out of the habit of using single lenses through becoming aware of the many theoretical lenses psychologists use in their research, and how to switch between them. Another tool toward this end would be to structurally include courses in curricula specifically focused on *integrative theorizing* that teach students and scholars how

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to synthesize insights from different lenses on the same phenomenon. Indeed, by structurally including such courses in our curricula, one also sends a message that the system values these issues, and that “shooting for the stars,” as Kruglanski (2001) coined the notion of bigger-picture theorizing, is within the purview of psychologists’ quest for the human essence.

As scholars in this field, changing our own behavior is thus important because, after all, we are the system. If we want the system to change, we need to break our own habits and show this to the next generation. The more difficult step is to extend this toward rewarding critical thinking and integrative theorizing more broadly in our field. If the current system is perceived to reward taking many pictures through the same lens, then we need to move toward rewarding taking many pictures through different lenses. This may take time, but it starts with practicing what we preach.

Of course, this particular view presumes that the photographer behind the lens wants to do what the system expects him or her to do. But what does that mean psychologically? Do we, as scholars in this field, follow the system because we believe that brings us greatest personal benefits, because we want to be liked by others in the system, or because we believe the system is fair and just? Even sketching a portrait of the photographer behind the camera requires a view of human essence.

One intriguing view of the photographer’s essence may be this: To see a child that first learns from his or her social surroundings what is valuable and rewarded in the world. These surroundings teach and encourage the child to take beautiful pictures with a given lens and without much consideration of what it takes for a picture to be considered beautiful. So the child takes pictures that fit those parameters and hopes they can be showcased somewhere for the world to see (in particular those close to the child). In our field, these are our interesting studies, our prestigious journals, and the people with whom we collaborate and the people who may someday hire us.

There is nothing wrong with this particular picture. Psychology is a young science, after all. But if we were to follow such a view of the psychologist as a child, then we would say that perhaps the time has come (p. 283) for the child to grow up. We have too many personal albums full of beautiful but very similar pictures. The child needs to start understanding its camera and the different lenses that could be used, and how they influence the quality of the pictures he or she takes with it. The child needs to start understanding that other photographers may use very different lenses that also produce beautiful pictures, and that collectively the true discovery lies in the beauty of the bigger picture. And as part of growing up is to stand up against the system and look for change, perhaps this is the phase the field is moving toward or even already going through, as long as we view the photographers behind the cameras as human beings that develop and learn, and through changing their habits and identity effectively change the system they are both embedded in and co-create.

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The grown-up psychologist, then, should treasure the empirical method as much as the child does today. But the grown-up psychologist should also be motivated and able to switch between the different lenses in the field, such as the three we differentiated in this volume. First, as psychologists we should be able to use the *portrait lens* that focuses on human essence within individual bodies and minds, perhaps connected by the human brain. Second, we should be able to use the *wide angle* lens that identifies the human essence in the dynamics between the individual and its relationships and groups. And third, we should be able to use the *ultra-wide angle* lens that captures the human essence in its embeddedness in broader cultural patterns of social life. Indeed, there may be a broader reason for why individuality and sociality are such important parts of the human essence, for instance that human beings cannot survive and relate without broader systems of meaning around us.

Is the Theory of Evolution the Answer?

In this final section, we explore whether there already is an existing broad and potentially integrative theory that may be doing the job we just advertised, namely Darwin's (1859) theory of evolution. Inspired by this theory, the Dutch biologist and Nobel Prize winner Nico Tinbergen provided a good example of the value of being motivated and able to switch lenses. That is, his famous "four why questions" (Tinbergen, 1963) reflect different types of scientific questions to explain the same phenomenon, grounded in evolutionary thinking.

Tinbergen (1963) differentiated four "why" questions that apply to the very same phenomenon, such as when you find myself crying. Both the first and second why question refer to what Tinbergen (1963) called the *proximate* explanations of behavior. The first why question is about *mechanism* (or causation), which basically is the question of what did just happen that causally made you cry. One answer could be that you just heard a relative has just died, or that you just saw many other people cry during the funeral. Both situations may trigger crying, which is in line with the broader (particularly social) psychological notion that situational triggers cause behavior. The contributions to the first and section sections of this volume often discussed "why" questions like this. For example, Gregg and Sedikides' (this volume) contribution describes studies in which participants are instructed, or otherwise triggered, to select questions that either implied or did not imply something positive for the self. Here we can see the trigger in the situation and the resulting self-enhancing behavior: Participants were more likely to select those questions implying something positive for their self. In a similar vein, Nadler's (this volume) (p. 284) contribution describes the uniquely human ability to ask about the intentions of someone offering help. Indeed, this suggests that human beings will respond more positively to being offered help if they perceive the helper to have prosocial intentions, and any situation trigger that signals this will therefore increase acceptance of such an offer.

Yet according to Tinbergen (1963), this specific type of question about crying is just one piece of the bigger picture. If scholars want to understand the phenomenon of crying,

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there are three other why questions to answer. For example, the second “why” question is about *development* (ontogeny), which basically is the question of how did you come to learn to cry in this situation. Perhaps you have always been the crying type, perhaps your family and friends have taught you to cry in situations like this, or perhaps you have vicariously learned that crying is the culturally normative thing to do after such a phone call, or during such a funeral, even when you do not feel sad yourself. This particular “why” question is not so visible across the contributions to this volume. This is presumably because few of the contributors have developmental-psychological roots or orientations. Nevertheless, this is an important question for many social phenomena; the question is basically how these phenomena have come about. For instance, scholars can study people’s attitudes and moral beliefs, but how have those been formed? Graziano and Schroeder’s contribution, for example, devotes one brief paragraph to developmental processes, suggesting some influences due to socialization, but without specifying how that works. This is by no means an exception—most contributions to this volume remain silent on this second why question. This, in our view, suggests a need to ask precisely those questions more, as long as if we want to get closer to the human essence.

The third and fourth “why” questions refer to *evolutionary* explanations of behavior. Specifically, the third “why” question refers to *function* (or adaptation). Assuming an evolutionary view on crying, then what purpose did and does it serve? What advantage did or does crying have? And finally, the fourth why question refers to *phylogeny* (evolution), which asks the question of how crying evolved as part of the human behavioral repertoire. Interestingly, Fischer’s discussant chapter of the third section raises such questions with respect to broad patterns of culture, which he views as an important part and product of evolutionary processes. A similar line of reasoning is used in the first section by IJzerman and Hogezeil (this volume), who nevertheless employ a portrait lens that zooms in on individual bodies (that is, they argue that individuals’ need to belong is partly due to their need to regulate their body temperature). Interestingly, however, when contributions in this volume touch upon these questions, it is more likely the third than the fourth question. That is, when applying some kind of evolutionary rationale, scholars seem to address the question about how the phenomenon is *adaptive* (see for instance Baumeister’s [this volume] contribution on free will).

By contrast, it seems much more difficult to *localize, in evolutionary time and history, the emergence* of the self, morality, prosocial behavior, aggression, values, and all else essential that can be found in this volume. As a consequence, quite a few contributions focus on comparing human and animal behavior, arguably as a proxy to answering Tinbergen’s fourth “why” question. These different types of “why” questions seem to crosscut some of the different lenses used to determine the human essence, but nevertheless offer an organizational structure to asking different questions about the (p. 285) same phenomenon. This structure is based on one particular theoretical lens, namely that of evolutionary theory. In this way, it seems that this lens would enable psychologists to combine the many and different essences identified in this volume, provided of course that one then needs to commit to Darwin’s theory (as some contributions seem to do; e.g., the contributions by

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Baumeister, Gregg, & Sedikides, Proulx, IJzerman, & Hogezeil, Schroeder & Graziano, and Vandello & Puryear).

What is also clear from this volume, however, is that this commitment is certainly not shared within the field (e.g., Gergen's, Reicher's and Adams et al.'s contributions). We, as editors, will leave it up to the reader to consider whether this particular theory offers the integrative tool we believe the field needs. This is not to suggest that we believe it is—in fact, in raising this very question, we also hope to raise the question of which *other* candidates are available that can serve as such a tool. The key point here is that scholars should ask themselves these questions much more in this field.

Human Essence in Conclusion

Throughout this volume, we aimed to showcase the diversity in theoretical perspectives in psychology, emphasize the importance of critical thinking and integrative theorizing in this field, and propose an organizational structure of three themes (individuality, sociality and cultural embeddedness) around which to discuss the notion of the human essence. The conclusion of this chapter is thus not about what psychology's view on the human essence is, but about how psychologists may be able to discover what the human essence is through theoretically integrating the various answers provided by the contributions to this volume. Indeed, any answer from psychology to the question of the human essence needs to be observable and interpretable through (at least) all three lenses, and the field needs a bigger-picture view of the human essence in order to tie together what all of us see through our different lenses.

One of the key insights of our analysis is a simple point. "We," as scholars of human behavior, are the photographers choosing the lens for the pictures we take. But "we," as human beings are also the subject of these pictures. Our roles as both photographer and subject influence and often reinforce each other. Our experiences across our life shape our beliefs about why people do what they do and our introspections about why "we," as particular individuals, do what "we" do. As psychologists who have studied attributions convincingly demonstrated, our interpretations about "we" as people in general and "we" as individuals often diverge: Others do what they do because that is the way they *are* (a dispositional attribution) but I do what I do because of the influences in my environment (a situational attribution). How we answer the question of why we behave the way we do thus very much depends on the perspective we adopt. And how we answer that question determines the lens "we" use as scholars-photographers of human behavior, the subject of our study and how we study it, and our interpretation of the picture we take. These reciprocal roles that we occupy often operate mutually to create habits of mind and professional identity and practice that lead us to focus on specific aspects of the picture, while missing the opportunity to include other important features or to take a picture from such a distance that we cannot discern particular elements that may be critical determinants of human behavior.

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In order to realize the potential in this diversity of perspectives in psychology, (p. 286) we need to break some of our habits that flow from the reward system behind contemporary psychological science. These habits relate to a focus on research rather than on integrative theorizing and critical thinking—a balance that we feel needs to change. In line with this, we need to be more open to having a more complex identity as psychologists—an identity that includes the many views on the human essence that we have seen in this volume. We need to start figuring out what connects our theories and views on the human essence, which is why a focus on theoretical integration is so important.

Of course, breaking habits and changing one's identity is not easy—let's call it "challenging." Similarly, it does not help to work in a broader system that does not seem to value integrative theorizing and critical thinking. Nevertheless, one key message of this concluding chapter is that we should not forget that we are that system, and that if we change our habits and identity, the system is already changing. We therefore hope that this volume on the human essence raises bigger-picture questions and issues that help us grow, both as scholars and as a field.

Further Reading

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