

The Relational Person: Challenging the Dominant Model in Psychology

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Robert J. Marks:

Greetings and welcome to Mind Matters News. I'm your psychologically aware host, Robert J. Marks, and that's what we're going to talk about today is psychology. We're interviewing authors of the chapters in the book, *Minding the Brain* by Angus J. Menuge, Brian R. Krouse and yours truly.

The book asks the question, "Is the mind more than the brain?" The debate is old. In Descartes's analysis of the problem, he referred to the mind as the soul, is the soul greater than the brain? This used to be primarily a philosophical and metaphysical discussion, but recently science has begun to weigh in and a lot of the science is addressed in the book *Minding the Brain*. Note that the mind brain problem is a question related to artificial intelligence. We are computers made out of meat is the question which is being asked. If so, then artificial general intelligence might be possible. It might be possible to get artificial intelligence that duplicates the human, but if there are other things going on outside the brain, if the mind is greater than the brain, AGI or artificial general intelligence might not be possible.

To address this problem, the book *Minding the Brain* is brought together some incredibly well-credentialed experts from a spectrum of specialties to address the question. I want to brag here and just mention some of the specialties that are present in the book. We have philosophers, we have neurosurgeons, we have mathematicians, we have biologists, computer scientists, cognitive scientists, physicists, neurology, computer engineers, and today we're going to be talking about psychology.

For more information about the book, visit mindingthebrain.org. That's mindingthebrain.org. I'm joined today by co-host Brian Krouse, who is the co-editor of *Minding the Brain*. Brian is a software engineer with research interest in the philosophy of mind, computer science and neuroscience. He has a master's degree. He has two master's degrees, one in computer science with a focus on AI, and that's from Arizona State University and a master's in applied mathematics with a focus on computational neuroscience at the University of Washington. The University of Washington, by the way, is my old haunt for a couple of decades. He was an early employee of GoDaddy, and that's the domain name registration and host company and spent most of his employ there in software development and management positions. And he culminated in his terminal position, I'm sorry, terminal. Is that okay, Brian, "terminal position"?

Brian Krouse:

That works.

Robert J. Marks:

In his terminal position as vice president of hosting develop. Hey Brian, it's good to be back with you again on the podcast.

Brian Krouse:

It's good to be here. Thanks, Bob for having me.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. Today we look at the mind brain problem through the lens of psychology. Our guest is Dr. Eric Jones. Eric is a professor of psychology at Regent University. He holds a BA in psychology, an MA in experimental psychology, and a PhD in experimental social psychology from Florida Atlantic University. His work concentrates on the connections among humans' relational nature and human social thought and behavior within social and positive psychology. He is a former associate director of the Society for Christian Psychology, and here's something you don't hear very much about in the modern media about higher academia. In 2018, he was voted Regent University's Teacher of the Year. It'd be nice in news about academia that we heard more about teaching. I recently got to know Eric during a visit to Regent University, and I know this is going to be a really interesting conversation because we really got into it and actually overstayed our time drinking coffee for the next appointment. So it's going to be a fun time. Hey, Eric.

Eric Jones:

Hey, nice to be here.

Robert J. Marks:

It's great. By the way, Eric, I mentioned this to him, has a great radio voice and I think you'll see that as we go on. Eric, the title of your chapter is A Case for the Relational Person. I think before we hand over the questioning to Brian Krouse, can you give us kind of an overview, an abstract of the chapter before we start to dig deeper?

Eric Jones:

Sure, yeah. So the chapter I wrote was trying to present a different view of the person than what we typically encounter in psychology. My background is in research, so I'm not a therapist and I've spent my time reading lots and lots of research and theory. And when I read that research and theory, it dawned on me early on, even in grad school, that this isn't the view of the person that I think of in my lived experience. So I've been thinking about this for a number of years and what I've come up with is this idea of a relational person that comes more out of philosophy and theology, but it applies very well into psychology.

And so my chapter looks at the relational person and contrasts that with a different view of the person, which is more typical in psychology. Then I look at a bunch of research in the field and show that there's a lot of research that's very consistent with this relational person view. Then I go into how this interacts with our brain and mind and talk about how the mind is ultimately consumed with these more relational activities and that big picture overview of what the chapter is.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, great. One of the premises is that we're more than computers made out of meat. There's a lot going on outside. Brian, what do you think?

Brian Krouse:

Yeah, I think this is really interesting how underlying the research in this area of social psychology, you could have these two competing visions of what a person might be. So how exactly does that play out in the psychology research or among the researchers themselves? Are people firmly in one camp or in another? Are these models front and center or how does that actually shape their work?

Eric Jones:

That's a great question. So in psychology, we have big areas of research like developmental and social and cognitive and physiological, and the assumptions differ. Our views of the person differ depending on what area you're in. But in social psych where I am, we frequently see an evolutionary psychological view of the person, which tends to be very materialistic and naturalistic. Frequently is seen a level above that as being very egoistic. This doesn't seem to square with a lot of the data that we see in the field and even outside of social psych into positive psychology and developmental psychology. And I think the biggest thing here is these things are not made explicit in a lot of the research. In theory, sometime it will be, but most of the time it's not. And so it's for the reader to infer what the researcher or theorist is basing all their work on. It's not apparent and you have to guess, but if you have a lot of experience, you can pick up pretty easily, especially in social psych where the evolutionary psychological frameworks are so dominant.

Brian Krouse:

Interesting. And so it sounds to me like you were describing in your introduction there that it took you a little bit to notice that there was this idea of a person that was operating in the background and shaping the way research was understood, but that just didn't seem consonant with your maybe common sense experience or your intuition about how the data would make most sense. Is that fair to say?

Eric Jones:

Yeah, I think what made it difficult for me, especially in grad school besides the lack of an internet, to be able to hear other people's views on things, is that these are philosophical choices that are two or three levels down from where we do the research and so these are things that are not explored frequently.

And I use a quote from Daniel Dennett who unfortunately just passed away a couple days ago, but where he says that researchers and scientists frequently have lots of assumptions, but they're unexplored or unexplained, and that's certainly the case in social psychology. We don't really talk about the person, although that seems odd, we don't. We just jump right in and start researching how people interact and think about each other and influence each other and so these philosophical choices we make are not really exposed and therefore they're not questioned much.

Brian Krouse:

Interesting, okay. Well, can we dig into these two different views of the person in a little bit more detail? Maybe could you expand first on the dominant model? What did you call it? The atomistic?

Eric Jones:

Yeah, the atomistic individual. The atomistic individual is someone who is seen as a self-contained entity. We tend to think of this kind of a person as being self-sufficient and trying to move toward independence. So you're on your own and egoism tends to go with this view of a person. And in the United States, this fits with us very well because culturally, we're very individualistic anyway. And so this is a view that's pretty dominant broadly. It's not just social psychology or psychology. Broadly, in our culture, this is the kind of individual that most of us understand ourselves and other to be.

Brian Krouse:

Interesting. And where do you think this is coming from in psychology? Have people latched onto this because of the psychology data or is it something that's more coming from outside from a different philosophical commitment?

Eric Jones:

Well, I think some of this is relatively unexamined historically. We do know that in psychology, our unit of analysis is the person, a single person. This is usually what we're investigating. Even when we do things in social psychology like groups and group dynamics, we're talking about how individuals interact with other individuals, generally speaking. And so part of it is just a focus on the unit of analysis, but embedded in a larger culture, here in the U.S. of individualism, that goes unquestioned. And so it seems to be a fit within the discipline itself, the way we conduct research and conceptualize things, but it's reinforced, I think, culturally also.

Brian Krouse:

That makes sense, okay. And so before, we can get into the research connecting to these two models in a little bit, but just so we understand both of these two competing models, can you now describe a little bit more about this relational model of the person? What does that look like?

Eric Jones:

Yeah, so a relational view of the person, this is going to be different than what most of us are used to thinking about. Not that most of us think much about what a person is, but if you were to think about what a person is, you're probably more comfortable with this individual or atomistic view of what a person is. But the relational view is counter to that and it's going to be more complex. It talks about a person as being part of an interdependent system, and you're unable to extract a person out of that interdependent system very easily or maybe not at all. And so we don't have the ideas of egoism or altruism and some of these terms that we typically use, those really fit better in an atomistic view of people and they don't really apply to a relational person because of the interdependent nature of things. And we can talk about that a little bit more also.

Brian Krouse:

I really liked your chapter, by the way. It was just a very interesting chapter, and I remember an analogy that you drew in that really clarified some of these ideas for me. You brought in the idea describing a system and of interdependent parts, you brought in the consideration of the human hand. Could you walk us through that analogy and how that helps you understand this idea of a relational person connected to the system?

Eric Jones:

Sure. Can I use a different analogy for the atomistic person first?

Brian Krouse:

Certainly. Yeah. Yeah, that would be great.

Eric Jones:

Will you allow that, Brian? Is that okay?

Brian Krouse:

I permit it.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay. I have final authority. I bless it.

Eric Jones:

Okay, okay. Well as long as you're in too, then I think I'm good. So the atomistic view of a person, I tend to think of as sort of a Lego piece and so we all familiar with Legos. If you ever stepped on one, you know what they are. And so a Lego, you know what it is, and you know it's designed to connect to other pieces to build things. And as much as you can take a bunch of individual pieces and put them together and build something, you can also take them right back apart and the pieces are just like they were. Putting them together, they didn't change anything. They're still Lego pieces.

Brian Krouse:

Doesn't change the essential nature of what that brick was. It's still the brick when it's connected or not.

Eric Jones:

Right, if you've got a blue square piece and you connect it with a red rectangular piece and you put other pieces around it and you separate them back apart after you've built something, you still have a blue square piece and a red rectangle piece, they're essentially the same. Their nature has not changed.

Brian Krouse:

So you can consider these a bunch of individuals connected together, but their identities are really very separable.

Eric Jones:

Yes, and you can take them right back apart, they're still the same and so this is the way we think of ourselves most of the time. We think of ourselves as an individual piece, and while we might be part of groups and we might be "connected to others," when we separate back out, I'm still me. I haven't fundamentally changed. So this is a good analogy, I think, for the atomistic view of the person. When you mentioned the hand, that's an analogy for the relational person. And the way that works is you think about your hand and everyone knows what a hand is. At least that's what we think, except if you were to cut your hand off and sever it from the rest of the body, is it still a hand?

This is the question. And so visually, of course it's still a hand. It still looks like a hand whether it's connected to the body or not. But in terms of function, which is what we're mostly interested in, how things work and why they work, then you don't have a functioning hand once you sever it from a body. It needs all these other subsystems of the body. It needs the circulatory system for nutrients, for oxygen to be transported. It needs muscles and tendons to move that are in the forearm and the rest of the arm. It needs the whole body to transport the hand other places. It needs a nervous system to function. It needs the digestive system to even create the nutrient. You need all these, the heart and the circulatory system, of course, all these things for the hand to function.

Brian Krouse:

So just for the hand to be a hand, it needs the whole body.

Eric Jones:

Functionally, yes. So visually you can sever a hand. It looks like a hand. Functionally, you can't sever a hand and have a hand is the distinction. And so if you think of it that way, and then you substitute a person in for the hand and other people in for the rest of the body, then you have this relational view that I'm trying to propose and convince people of. And that is, you can look like a person by yourself, but you're not a person by yourself. You have the appearance of it, but functionally, you're not a person by yourself. And we have nothing but mountains of data to support that. And so this idea of the individual, it's pervasive and it's dominant and it's incorrect.

Robert J. Marks:

So Eric, let me ask you a question. I'm an engineer. So everything in the world, I look, I look through the lens of engineering, but there is this experiment called Milgram's experiment, which I'm sure you're familiar with. And Milgram's experiment was the following. There was an experimenter, there was a learner, there was a teacher. The experimenter was a person who was in on the experiment. The teacher was a guy that was ordered to give electric shock to a learner who, if they answered incorrectly, would be administered a shock. However, the learner was also in on the experiment. And as the shock was increased by the teacher who was a volunteer, they would pretend that they would get shocked. And then as the time went on, as the learner got deeper and deeper and answered more incorrect questions, the shocks got more and more and more.

And the experiment in psychology was that they wanted to see how far the teacher would go in administering the shocks when the experimenter, the guy that gave the orders was in on the experiment and was a figure of authority. And it was astonishing that a lot of people went on with this and went to the end and actually shocked the person to the point where the learner faked a heart attack and they just kept on. It was terrible.

Now, that experiment, it seems to me, was measuring something which happens, which is common to a lot of people. But then there were people that didn't pass it. In other words, there were teachers that came in and said, "No, I'm not going to do any more shocks. I'm not going to do that." But that was just measuring one thing. And in engineering we have something called hidden variables. And these hidden variables are other things which drive decisions, like whether the teacher is going to administer shocks or not. And I think that just looking at the surface is the one type of psychology, but you're talking about the different hidden variables, the different things which mitigate that response. Am I on track at all, or am I totally off track?

Eric Jones:

Well, first of all, kudos for bringing up great old school, traditional mainline social psychological research. Good for you.

Robert J. Marks:

Well, see, that's the thing. Okay that that's old stuff but most of the psychological experiments that I'm familiar with, and again, I'm not a psychologist like you are, but most of them are trying to measure one outcome. And that one outcome seems to be kind of narrow. And so there's these mitigating aspects of the human personality that bring the behavior for being tested for one thing, it brings it to the surface. But that isn't the whole story. It's much deeper.

Eric Jones:

Well, I tell you, you couldn't have picked a better example. The Milgram studies are fascinating for lots of reasons. Their connection to World War II atrocities and those sorts of things. That's a whole interesting side. But what you're bringing up is this really basic question of how much do other people influence us and how far are we willing to go based on that social influence? And the whole idea behind the Milgram studies was we didn't know what people were willing to do based on sheer obedience. And so Milgram decided to test it and find out what are the boundaries of obedience. Will we obey to the point of harm? And in those studies, before he ran them, he wasn't sure he could get people to shock others at all, much less to the point of real significant harm. In fact, he asked a bunch of clinical psychologists before he ran the study, and they all said that you're not going to get people to shock anyone at any significant levels. So everyone was in agreement this wasn't going to work.

And so of course, he runs a study and had almost two thirds of the people shocked at the highest levels possible. So this surprised him and other psychologists, and it makes you wonder what's going on. Well, it shows you how powerful the social influence is, and the power of social influence really reinforces this relational view of the person.

Think about this. If we're all individual pieces and we're all separate and we're all our own entities, why would social influence be so strong? It's inconsistent with that idea. But if we're relational people and we're highly interconnected and we're in these social systems and the interdependence and interconnections are super high and super dense, then of course we're going to be very influenced by those we're connected with, even if it's temporary, such as this case where you don't know the researcher, this is a new situation, but those connections are immediate. And so you have someone walking into this situation. You have, on the one hand, the person being shocked, but you also have the person telling you to keep going. And so there's a lot of social influence going on there.

Can I tell you about a variation of the study that's really interesting for our discussion?

Robert J. Marks:

Yes, yes. Love to hear it.

So after the initial study, which is the only one most people know about, Milgram ran a number of variations of this study. One of them that he ran involved two teachers. And so you still had the confederate, the person in on the study as the one who's the learner, but now you have two teachers and you have the researcher. And in this one, they just split up the duties between these two people.

One of them would give the word pairs that the learner was supposed to answer to, and the other one would administer the shocks. And as the study goes on, what you find is if one of the teachers quits, says "I'm not shocking anymore," then 90% of the other teachers will also stop. However, if the first teacher doesn't stop shocking and keeps going all the way the end, and-

The first teacher is a confederate, he's in on it, right?

Eric Jones:

They had different versions. They had somewhere it was just two actual people, just two regular participants, but they also had confederates.

And so in the other one, if the person doesn't stop and they keep going all the way to the end, then 90% of the other teachers do also. That's just a change of one person, and you get basically a 90-

Robert J. Marks:

People are taking really strong social cues...

Eric Jones:

Yes, very strong. And again, if we're individuals, that doesn't really make a lot of sense. This is why the Milgram studies are so interesting to people is because we so underestimate these social connections, even ones that are new and may be temporary. So you can imagine the power of the ones that are long term and ongoing.

Brian Krouse:

So I think I could see how these two different models could play out in understanding the research better with this example. So with an atomistic model, you're going to need to understand the behavior of the participants in the experiment just in terms of their own individualistic motivations. But as you have these strong... I suppose you could try to reduce the social dynamics just to the individual motivations, but there's something more natural about just describing the motivations as part of the social system more primarily, and that has greater explanatory power to understand why these people are doing what they're doing.

And so maybe analogous to the hand and the body, you're talking about all the ways in which the hand is dependent biologically on the other parts of the system is analogous to these social forces that these people are feeling in this experiment. Yeah, it's interesting.

Eric Jones:

Yeah, there is a lot there, but that does give you a little bit of grounding, as you say, to look at research and theory and have some sort of expectation of what you're going to find. If you go with the Lego model, that atomistic view of the person, then you would expect we would be much more self-oriented and self-determined, and the external cues would be less influential. But if we're relational, then those social connections are going to be much more formidable in terms of how we think and act.

Brian Krouse:

I remember a term you used in the chapter where you emphasized that some social psychology researchers will go so far as talk about this term relational self, but that you are really trying to emphasize an ontological relational view of the person, which seems like you're trying to push that more deeply. How does that work out? What are you trying to get at with the ontological term?

Eric Jones:

Yeah, that's a great question and I'm glad you asked it because occasionally you do see people talk about relational this or relational that in psychology and other areas, and what they really mean is social, and I'm all for social. I'm in social psychology. That's great. And I think anyone would understand that social connections and social behavior is important and yada, yada, yada. What I'm suggesting is, but why are we social? And this is where I go to the relational ontology, meaning our core nature, what we're like. I would say the way we're created is relational. In other words, there was an intent and a design behind what we are and why we are. We're made for something, and we are actually created then to achieve that particular goal.

And I would guess that we're made for community, and therefore you have a person that's relational. We're highly interdependent. We're created for that. That's the way we're made. So that's our nature. And that nature then means that we see a lot of social thought and behavior being primary in our lives. So the social stuff is great, but we're trying to get a little deeper and say, but why.

Brian Krouse:

That makes sense even though, and it doesn't really interfere with that idea. The fact that each of us as people have our own self will, free will, if you will. Acknowledging free will doesn't force you down the atomistic path, does it?

Eric Jones:

No, that's a great question though. Yeah, so the way I talk about it is we still have free will, but we are somewhat constrained by our relational connections. There's certain things that theoretically maybe we can do or not do, but because of those we're connected to, some of those things really are almost impossible. For instance, if you're married, you might be free to hit your wife as hard as you can, but realistically, you can't do that. You're constrained from that, I would argue. I hope you are.

Brian Krouse:

One would hope.

Robert J. Marks:

Eric, I certainly am.

Brian Krouse:

Yes, indeed. Yeah, that makes sense. I would love to hear more about the research details, if we could delve more into the various research examples to show how they fit with one model or the other. But I think we're out of time for this first episode, so maybe that's what we could dive into in our next episode. Does that sound okay?

Eric Jones:

Sure thing. Sounds good.

Robert J. Marks:

Okay, Eric, Brian, thank you very much. We've been talking to Dr. Eric Jones. He's the author of the chapter, A Case for The Relational Person. It's a chapter in the book Minding the Brain, and you can find out more information about that @mindingthebrain.org. And so until next time, be of good cheer.

Announcer:

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