

Carlson R. Where is the person in personality research?

Psychol. Bull. 75:203-19, 1971.

[Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ]

Analyses of 226 studies published in the 1968 volumes of two major personality journals show that dominant research methods are incapable of addressing significant questions about personality and pose serious ethical problems. A conceptual scheme for ordering research strategies and suggestions for reform are proposed. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI®) and the *Science Citation Index*® (SCI®) indicate that this paper has been cited in over 130 publications.]

Rae Carlson

Department of Psychology
Rutgers—State University
of New Jersey
New Brunswick, NJ 08903

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As I grew increasingly disenchanted with the quality of research appearing in our major personality journals during the late 1960s, it occurred to me that someone ought to do a major critical analysis of the field. A Special Fellowship from NIMH freed me from a heavy teaching load at my West-Coast university for a year of independent work at Educational Testing Service in 1968-1969. (There was a small drama here: I sought a fellowship in the aftermath of a divorce and committed myself to move to Princeton for a year, bringing along a mother and two teenaged daughters. After burning bridges, I discovered that a "freeze" on awards had been imposed. Would I have support or not? Luckily, the award came through a month after we moved.) "Where is the person...?" was drafted (along with several other papers, all subsequently published) during that fellowship year.

This paper, unlike anything else I've ever published, had immediate impact: nearly 1,000 reprint-requests, many of them "fan letters." Reasons for its frequent citation seem obvious.

First, the paper addressed the whole spectrum of personality research appearing in our two most prestigious journals, not simply issues of concern to investigators of a particular problem. Second, I think the paper voiced profound worries about our method-bound inquiry that were widely shared, if rarely articulated.

Although my paper reflected an ideology of science somewhat at odds with that of journal gatekeepers, the message couldn't be dismissed. Empirical evidence revealed the sheer poverty of our methodological conventions for the study of personality. Possibly, my obvious *feeling* about the issues—disciplined by regard for evidence produced by investigators themselves—signaled the "reflexivity" that now asks us to examine our *own* assumptions as thoughtfully as we consider the responses of our subjects. Yet much of my message may have been received as vicarious catharsis rather than as a program for reform. Would investigators turn to studying individual lives over significant periods of time? Heed the "voice" of a research participant in defining personal experience? Invoke nonparochial theoretical guidance? Or might the tenure-hungry investigators of the late 1960s become the journal gatekeepers of the 1980s—even *more* bound to the miniature theories and those productivity-enhancing conveniences of a failed scientific paradigm that prompted my critique in the first place?

This story has no happy ending as yet. Any consciousness-raising induced by my paper (and reflected in its frequent citation) hasn't turned around the field. Resurveying the import of work published in our major journal (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*) 14 years later,¹ I found little change. Despite some improvements and a few splendid papers, we still rely on quickie studies of convenient undergraduate conscripts to tell us about "personality." They can't tell us much, because we insist on investigator-imposed variables and on "clean" experimental/psychometric research designs that leave the *person* exactly "nowhere" in publishable personality research. Surely we can do better?

1. Carlson R. What's social about social psychology? Where's the person in personality research?
J. Personal. Soc. Psychol. 47:1304-9, 1984.