PERSONHOOD: AFRICAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

Joseph Kahiga Kiruki, Moi University
Jason T. Eberl, IUPUI
Communalistic
- Predominant among African communities
- Confined to specific communities bounded by…
  - Tribe
  - Culture
  - Race
  - Gender
  - Religion
  - Class
Basic Views of Personhood

- Transcendentalist
  - Predominant among Western traditions
  - Individual personal identity transcends aforementioned boundaries
  - Persons have *infinite* moral value – literally, “without boundaries”
  - Persons as …
    - Self-conscious
    - Rational
    - Autonomous
In the Gikuyu language, “human being” is expressed by the term “mundu”
- ‘Mu’ = being
- ‘undu’ = reason or rationality
- Hence, a human being is “a being with reason”

- Aristotle: human beings are “rational animals”
From the African perspective, personhood may be diminished or lost in two ways:

- Lessening or loss of connection with other diverse beings – Kiswahili: “Mtu duni”
- Being devoid of reason – Gikuyu: “kindu”

From the western perspective, personhood is an “all or nothing” affair...

- Hence, it cannot be diminished by lack of interrelations with other beings or diminishment of rationality.
- Although, complete loss of reason may result in loss of personhood.
Performance theorists, including Peter Singer, Michael Tooley, and Mary Anne Warren, argue that a human being is a “person” only if they actively instantiate capacities such as:

- Self-consciousness
- Rationality
- Autonomous volition
- Ability to communicate using language
Other theorists, such as John Finnis, John Kavanaugh, Patrick Lee, and Eric Olson, argue that a human being is essentially a “living animal of the species Homo sapiens.”

- For Kavanaugh, Lee, and Finnis, all living human animals count as “persons” due to their intrinsic potentiality for self-conscious rational thought and autonomous volition, even if one cannot yet, or can no longer, actualize that potentiality.

- For Olson, personhood is a phase of a living human animal’s existence. You and I are essentially living human animals, but not essentially persons.
From both African and western perspectives, human consciousness arguably transcends the limitations of matter.

- From the African perspective, consciousness attains transcendence through human *communion*.
  - *Self*-consciousness is achieved through recognition within a specific community
  - Lack of recognition of "others" results in discrimination and diminishment of personhood
From the western perspective, consciousness is argued to be an inherently transcendent property of persons.

- Jackson’s “knowledge argument”
- Chalmers’s “zombie argument” – property dualism
- Swinburne’s “disembodiment argument” – substance dualism

Aquinas: The intrinsic ontological nature of a person as a self-conscious rational and autonomous being metaphysically precedes the expression of this nature in extrinsic relationships.

This leads to the moral obligation to recognize the presence of consciousness, and other essential qualities of persons, in all human beings, including those outside of one’s specific community.
Person and Community

African communalistic concept of personhood: “I am, because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”

- An individual person does not and cannot exist alone, only corporately.
- An individual’s existence is owed to past generations, as well as contemporaries.
- Self-communication is essential to an individual person’s existence as they are involved in a dynamic give-and-take relationship with their community.
Western *solipsistic* concept of personhood: “I think, therefore I am” (Descartes)

- An individual person’s existence as a self-conscious rational and autonomous being is not essentially dependent upon there being any other persons.
Yet, according to Aristotle, human beings are inherent “social animals.”

- There is an inherently *relational* dimension to human personhood, as noted also by Aquinas, even if one’s bare existence is not dependent on that of others.
- Alasdair MacIntyre: Human beings are “dependent rational animals,” which entails complementary virtues of “acknowledged dependence” and “acknowledged responsibility.”

Hence, there can be both an ‘I’ that is metaphysically unique, and a ‘Thou’ to whom the ‘I’ naturally gravitates.
Distinction between “ontological” and “moral” concepts of personhood:
- Person as “being”
- Person as “agent”

Persons as agents, premised upon their basic existence as self-conscious and rational beings, actualize their capacity for autonomous volition – freedom.
- This entails moral responsibility for one’s freely willed actions.
- The “moral self” is shaped over time by one’s freely willed interior and exterior actions.
- The ultimate goal of the “moral self” is to enter into meaningful and quality relationships with the “other” in community.
To be is to be “substance-in-relation.”
- Invokes the metaphysically prior bare existence of an “individual substance of a rational nature” (Boethius) influential in western ontology,
- as well as the inherently communal dimension of personhood common to African ontology.

Self-realization beyond bare existence requires mutual recognition within an interconnected web of ‘I-Thou’ relationships (Buber).

Such self-realization allows for the construction of a person’s authentic “moral self” (Taylor) and the exercise of true “freedom” within, and not in isolation from, one’s community.
Bibliography

Bibliography

What implications do you see of these differing views of personhood for the ethical conduct of research, particularly when western researchers are working within the African context?

How might the African concept of personhood inform the manner in which, e.g., informed consent is obtained from potential research participants, or attendant risks and benefits are evaluated?

Is there a danger that a communal concept of personhood may lead to the sublimation of individual rights in favor of the community’s interests? If so, how could this danger be avoided in the research context?

Does a communal concept of personhood entail ethical obligations on the part of individuals to voluntarily agree to participate in research that may benefit their community, even if doing so involves some individual risk?

To what extent should researchers attempt to embed themselves within the communities in which they are conducting research to ameliorate their being perceived as “other” or potentially viewing research participants as such?