

The possible in psychology

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Definition

As the science that studies the mental functioning, behavioural expression and contextual embeddedness of human beings, psychology is well equipped to deal with questions related to the possible and, more specifically, to human possibility (and impossibility). This entry examines seven main branches – general psychology, developmental psychology, individual differences, social psychology, clinical psychology, organisational psychology and educational psychology – and focuses on: a) how the notion of the possible and associated concepts are employed by key theories; b) what the consequences of focusing on human possibility – and its inter-play with impossibility – are for our understanding of psychology's sub-disciplines; and c) what new questions we could raise and studies we could conduct that would place psychology at the heart of the emerging field of possibility studies. The aim is to offer a prospective look at old psychological questions, one that integrates agency, indeterminacy, multiplicity and the future into our concerns, research, and practice.

Keywords: psychology, human possibility, developmental psychology, individual differences, social psychology, clinical psychology, organisational psychology, educational psychology

As the science that studies the mental functioning, behavioural expression and contextual embeddedness of human beings, psychology is well equipped to deal with questions related to the possible and, more specifically, to human possibility (and impossibility). And yet, these notions rarely feature within a classic psychological vocabulary and are certainly not often found in textbook, handbooks or regular volumes (for a marked exception, see Martin & Sugarman, 1999). To be fair, the language used by psychologists does refer back to the possible or, rather, to various dimensions or aspects of it, as many entries in this encyclopedia amply demonstrate. From curiosity and imagination to counterfactual thinking, hope and innovation, human possibility is studied in psychology at an emotional, cognitive, and motivational level in the case of individuals, groups, and even society. However, we are still to fully engage, as a community, with the possible as an authentic field of inquiry for psychological and behavioural sciences (for a call, see Glăveanu, 2018).

There are a number of reasons for this state of conceptual omission. First of all, the notion of the possible might seem rather abstract and become easily relegated to the field

of philosophy and logic. Second, the complexity of the topic makes it hard to 'locate' it within any of the traditional branches of the discipline (even if, as we will see in this entry, all its main branches do have something relevant to tell us about human possibility). In an era of increased specialisation, the generalist and interdisciplinary approach required by possibility studies can be exciting for some psychologists but challenging for others. Thirdly, and most importantly, while engagement with the possible shapes our life course and defines our existence as human beings, the focus for many in psychology, historically and today, has been rather on impossibilities or the different kinds of determinism – biological, psychological, social – that reduce agency, choice, and alternatives (Immergluck, 1964). In other words, the limits and constraints placed on human potentiality have always been given more attention, empirical and theoretical, than its triggers, processes, and consequences. This state of affairs has many roots, from an implicit assumption that living in society necessarily means 'taming' an individual's possibility to act as he or she wishes, to the convenience with which problems and obstacles on the path of such possibility can be studied in an analytical manner. In any case, the impact on the discipline is the same: a relative lack of interest for the broad topic of the possible and a consistent focus on the impossibilities that condition, if not determine, who we are and who we become.

Of course, as this entry will demonstrate, there are many exceptions to this general observation, and they can be found in all the traditional areas of psychological science. As follows, I will consider seven such domains, each one containing a variety of perspectives or approaches, and focus on: a) how the notion of the possible, even when not used directly, is embedded within key theories or studies; b) what the consequences of focusing on human possibility – and its interplay with impossibility – are for our understanding of psychology's sub-disciplines; and c) what new questions we could raise and what kind of research we could conduct that would help place psychology at the heart of an emerging field of possibility studies. My discussion will necessarily be selective, both due to space constraints and the fact that it is meant to be an invitation for further reflection rather than a systematic review of all the existing literature. More than this, my hope is to offer a prospective look at old psychological questions, one that integrates agency, indeterminacy, multiplicity and the future into our concerns, research, and practice.

The possible in general psychology and the history of psychology

If, as noted above, at present possibility research in psychology is still fragmentary and rather scarce, the history of the discipline paints a different picture. Most of the 20th century currents within psychology were in fact concerned with human possibility, one way or another. Pragmatism, for example, argued for the bi-directional agency between person and his or her context, both social and material (Mead, 1934; Dewey, 1934). In psychoanalysis, in contrast, the focus was often on closed opportunities due to early life experiences but also on how a better engagement with the contents of our unconscious can expand self-related possibilities (Freud, 1922; Cooper, 2013). Behaviourism, for as reductive as it has been in portraying human action, had its followers harbour the belief that everything can be possible for the person given the right kind of environment (Watson, 1930). The cognitive revolution opened up the 'black box' of the mind in order to examine the ways in which individuals become active in constructing knowledge and, often, how they change their own mental schemas to achieve new outcomes (Neisser, 1967). More recently, the narrative turn (Bruner, 1991) made us aware of the power of stories and storytelling to transform our reality, including our view of self, others and society.

General psychology, as the branch that carries the legacy of all these historical orientations, and many more, offers an interesting picture of the mental processes primarily assumed to help us find and explore new possibilities in life. These are, first and foremost, complex cognitive functions including reasoning, the imagination, memory (e.g., constructive memory, Schacter & Addis, 2007) as well as motivation (e.g., self-actualising motives; Maslow, 1943). However, such view masks the important contribution of other, more basic psychological processes, such as emotional responses, make to our engagement with possibility. Surprise, for instance, helps us become aware of a new stimulus in our environment and curiosity can prompt us to explore it further and, in the process, discover new meanings and affordances (Berlyne, 1978). Perception itself is infused by the possible inasmuch as it doesn't build a replica of what exists in the world, but it is always driven by present concerns and already oriented towards the future (Gibson, 1979).

General psychology and scholars of the history of the discipline would thus benefit from raising more questions about the ontological roots of human agency, the epistemological orientations that make us sensitive to what expands and restricts our sense of possibility and, last but not least, the conceptual tools needed to capture the former and methodological tools needed to investigate the latter. What do different schools in psychology tell us about human possibility? How do the mental and behavioural processes we commonly study contribute to our engagement with the possible and impossible in our

daily existence? How could we study both in a balanced manner, one that is analytical enough to make key distinctions and yet holistically able to build a bigger picture?

The possible in developmental and life-course psychology

Developmental psychology focuses on the emergence of and changes in our psychological functions and behaviour across the lifespan. As such, it studies how our capabilities and related set of possibilities develop in relation to the enablers and constraints of a social, cultural, and material environment. It is tempting to see this trajectory as linear and progressing from 'more' to 'less' and yet, such depictions are often too simple and overly deterministic (an accusation often aimed at key theorists in the field, e.g., Jean Piaget; Piaget, 1928). We don't just pass in life from a narrower to a wider range of possibilities but our engagement with the possible depends on a series of factors, including sex, age, family conditions, social and economic status, cultural background, etc. Even when considering age alone, there are ups and downs in how open and ready we might be to explore new ways of thinking, acting and being. For example, our self-esteem about what we can do doesn't progress in a linear manner, but tends to slump during adolescence (Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005). Equally, creativity – or, rather, divergent thinking – is supposed to peak during preschool years, then decrease in the first and fourth grades, and finally gradually recover, depending on personal circumstances (Torrance, 1968).

This complexity is well captured by life-course approaches to human development that tend to consider the co-development of person and context. In this perspective, the study of human possibility cannot be restricted to an investigation of the individual alone, but necessarily has to consider the role of the environment (from small group to community and society) in shaping what is possible and impossible for the person to think, want, or do. This view of interdependence is extended to how life-course theorists understand all development (Zittoun, 2012) and makes them more inclined to follow it up to old age (see the entry in this encyclopedia). Indeed, if developmental psychology tends to have a bias towards younger ages as a privileged site for growth, a life-course perspective is interested by the interplay between possibilities and impossibilities across the entire lifespan.

A key question for developmentalists to raise is how growing up, living and becoming old in different cultural contexts around the world impacts people's sense of personal agency and the domains of their life and society in which they could (or are expected to) express this agency. This would not only help us identify those areas in which development is driven forward by an expanded horizon of opportunities, but also examine what

happens when this horizon is actively restricted for personal or political reasons. Second, studies of the cultural life-course could benefit from theorising the possible as a central human concern and fundamental type of experience across ages and contexts. This would expand existing research into the role of imagination across the life (Hviid & Villadsen, 2017) and shed new light on particular contexts such as migration, education, work, etc.

The possible in personality, cognitive and neuropsychology

Individual differences psychology studies the psychological profiles of individuals according to various indicators (mostly related to personality and cognition, but not only). Neuropsychology, as the sub-field situated at the interface between psychological science and neuroscience, tries to locate these individual differences within neural mechanisms and biological processes. While it might seem that possibility is too complex to ever be 'mapped' onto the brain's activity, it is undeniable that neurological mechanisms contribute to the phenomenon through their relation to psychological functions like sensation, perception, affect, and decision making (although the exact relation between these processes and their biological basis has been and remains a matter of debate; see Miller & Keller, 2000). Relating human possibility to neuroscience also reminds us of the embodied nature of exploring options, taking decisions, and envisioning alternatives in everyday life. In this area, we could examine more closely the physiological (chemical, electrical, neuronal) processes that restrict or enhance the psychological processes known to be involved in envisioning new possibilities and exploring them (cognitively, affectively, physically, etc.). Or ask if there are any specific neurological processes (e.g., synaptic pruning) that support the brain's contribution to our engagement with the possible.

At the level of personality and cognition, there are a series of processes widely assumed to contribute to our engagement with the possible. For personality, these include traits like openness to experience and tolerance of ambiguity. Such dimensions have been consistently shown to correlate with creative expression (Runco, 2007) by making the individual sensitive to novel stimuli in his or her environment and able to withstand longer periods of tension, confusion, or not knowing. In terms of cognition, creativity is considered to relate closely with divergent thinking, or our ability to think of many plausible solutions for an existing problem, and lateral thinking, the capacity to pursue even weak connections between ideas that can lead to creative insight (Gilhooly, Ball & Macchi, 2015). When it comes to creative imagery, the possibility of building images in the mind and combining them with each other in new and unexpected ways becomes essential (Finke, 2014). And

if we are to expand the range of interest from cognition to affect and motivation, we can discuss how intrinsic motivation participates, for example, in achieving a state of flow highly conducive for invention and discovery (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

In summary, the psychology of individual differences can make significant contributions to our understanding of person-level characteristics and processes that participate in our awareness and exploration of the possible. But, as noted from before, it is equally important to understand the expression of these characteristics as a function of the overall situation and life trajectory of the person. Just like neuroscience can provide knowledge as to how the brain operates when we image, create or innovate, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the brain belongs to a body and to a person that is embedded within a specific context, at a certain moment in time. As such, useful questions from this perspective would consider how individual attributes shape and are shaped by living in a society together with other people and within a history that is, at once, personal and collective.

The possible in social and sociocultural psychology

The latter are, in fact, the kind of questions typically raised by social and sociocultural psychologists who study the human mind and behaviour in their social context. There are, of course, some key differences between the two branches. Social psychology is concerned with interpersonal, group and inter-group processes and the way they come to shape individual and collective actions. Sociocultural psychology emphasises the fact that these are not only 'external' influences, but the social environment and our interactions with other people are constitutive for the human self (see Mead, 1934). Both approaches have thus a lot to tell us about the experience of possibility (and impossibility) for individuals, groups, and communities. However, because of the difference noted above, scholars in these sub-fields tend to reach different conclusions about human agency in society.

Going through a social psychology textbook, anyone would be forgiven if they believed that other people often reduce our range of possibility or, even worse, lead us to committing unthinkable acts. From conformity and obedience (Milgram, 1974) to crowd behaviour (Le Bon, 1896) and the bystander effect (Latane & Darley, 1968), social psychology is full of cautionary tales about social interaction and its consequences. Society is often, even if implicitly, described as an oppressive force that moulds and sometimes squashes individual freedom and sense of the possible. The notion of de-individuation, a process presumed to take place in certain social contexts in which the person becomes 'less' him or herself and takes on the attitude and behaviour of others, is a classic example

in this regard (Diener, 1979). On the other hand, socioculturalists would argue that even if some situations push us, more or less, into doing things we wouldn't normally do, it is also the case that there would be no human agency without social interaction and exchanges of position (Martin & Gillespie, 2010) to begin with. Indeed, it is in and through the self–other relation that we experience the world as an other person would, develop new perspectives on it and get to understand our own perspective as one among many (Glăveanu, in press), all of these important, possibility-enabling processes.

Interesting questions to raise within this approach have to do with the kind and type of human relations that constrict or foster our agency (or do both). Do face to face, close relationships matter more in this regard than distant relations established, for example, with people we admire but might have never met or with generic audiences like the general public? Following from this, how do we establish those human interactions that do cultivate the possible in our existence and how do we maintain them? Most of all, how does society participate to individual and collective agency through its norms, values, technologies and institutions? Instead of adopting reductionist accounts of the collective as mindless or dangerous, possibility studies scholars in social psychology would do well to explore sociability as the origin of creativity and one of its key drivers (Simmel, 1949).

The possible in work and organisational psychology

The interest in creating possibility-enhancing conditions for individuals to perform their tasks well is at the heart of work and organisational psychology. These sub-disciplines, although distinct, are both concerned with how individuals and groups function at the workplace, within an institutional context. If traditionally the workplace has been a context in which people exercised their habits and applied their existing knowledge, more and more we are witnessing a radical transformation of mentalities and requires skillsets. Instead of routine and predictability, jobs are demanding the creative handling of uncertainties and quick processes of adaptation to changing conditions (there is little surprise, then, that creativity is listed among other key 21st century skills; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). In other words, an openness to and anticipation of what is possible becomes a requirement for most employees instead of a luxury reserved for the few, primarily in managerial positions.

At a broader level, a possibility-driven research agenda in I/O psychology can help us raise important questions about the future of work and the numerous transformations already shaping it (some resulting from recent adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic, others emerging from the introduction of new and disruptive technologies). Mapping out

different scenarios in this regard could help us reflect, from now, on the broader implications of these changes for our work-life balance, well-being, and psychological coping.

The interest in possibility is reflected by work done on leadership and, in particular, the intersection between leaderships styles and creativity (Hughes, Lee, Tian, Newman & Legood, 2018). Also by the longstanding concern for how groups create and what might be the obstacles but also facilitators of team innovation (Reiter-Palmon, 2017). A particular focus in this regard, reflecting the high levels of diversity at work, is placed on multidisciplinary teams and the ways in which they use differences as a resource (Ness & Riese, 2015). Innovation has been and continues to be a key concern for work and organisational psychologists (Anderson, Potočnik & Zhou, 2014), especially the factors that promote risk taking and help employees appreciate and look for novelties at the workplace. Organisational learning and change are established sub-fields of research (Todnem By, 2005) that are expanding today in new directions as a consequence of distributed forms of possibility.

And it is precisely this distribution and ‘democratisation’ of what it means to find and exploit new and exciting potentials that should be of interest for work and organisational researchers moving forward. The fact that, for instance, it is not only leaders today that are expected to initiate and manage change processes, but each and every employee (the theme of followership is already discussed; see Uhl-Bien, Riggio, Lowe & Carsten, 2014). In addition, we need to distinguish between possibilities and impossibilities situated at an individual, group and organisational levels. While it is easy to assume that the latter frame the former, we need to acknowledge the fact that change takes place at many levels within an organisation and that, sometimes, individual actions can open up new horizons of possibility for everyone else. Just as top-down transformations can still be participative in how they are implemented. Of course, the question is how these change processes are received and how organisational climate and culture cultivate (or not) openness to novelties, respect for difference, and an authentic curiosity about the future.

The possible in clinical and therapeutic psychology

I have noted before that living within worlds of possibility and developing possible selves is the ontological condition of human beings. Clinical psychology, and especially the study of psychopathology, helps us problematise the issue of what is ‘normal’ and focus on conditions that, one way or another, restrict certain possibilities for the individual (while potentially opening up others, previously unnoticed or underused). It would be simplistic,

though, to associate clinical psychology with the sign of reduced possibility. On the contrary, we can use its study as an opportunity to expand our own understanding of what is normal, natural, or universally human. As the subfield of ethno-psychiatry shows us (Gaines, 1992), we need to be cautious when assuming that some specific possibilities need to be noticed or actualized in order to have a fully human existence. These assumptions usually betray Western-centric assumptions about how life should be lived and, especially, what counts as worth doing in life. On the other hand, for some time the study of disabilities has been moving towards an understanding of special conditions as potential resources when seen from a new perspective (e.g., the idea of being differently abled). And also towards helping those being diagnosed and their care-givers to actively explore such possibilities. Last but not least, the diagnostic itself can be a useful for making meaning about one's condition but it could also be used as a label for what becomes possible and impossible for the person, especially when employed by other people (for discussions about diagnostic culture and psychiatry see Rose, 2018).

Therapeutic and counselling psychology, conversely, are much more directly oriented towards appreciating the person's potential and helping him or her achieve it, above and beyond the constraints of a diagnostic. Therapists work with their clients to help them understand the root of experienced impossibilities and think of ways, if not to overcome them, then at least to turn them into opportunities for personal transformation. While there are many therapeutic approaches – ranging from psychoanalysis to cognitive-behavioural therapies and humanistic or existential orientations – this possibility-extending ethos is central for most. Some therapies, especially drawing on humanistic psychology and a client-centred philosophy (see Rogers, 1951), are explicitly aimed at creating the context for an in-depth exploration of the possible let by the client him or herself. Ultimately, the kind of questions clinicians and therapists can raise more often concern precisely the consequences of opening up such spaces for the person and for the counselling relationship. Confronting and understanding one's impossibilities is a fundamental part of the process and these branches of psychology can shed new light on the best ways in which patients or clients can be helped through this difficult process that is, ultimately, one of self-transformation as much as it is one of self-discovery (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995).

The possible in learning and educational psychology

The related branches of the psychology of learning and educational psychology are explicitly concerned with cultivating human possibility, specifically through learning and education. Learning is, just like creativity, an act of engaging with the possible by expanding the ways in which the person understands and acts on the world. And yet, oftentimes, the process of learning is seen as primarily one of acquisition and not necessarily transformation of knowledge. Jean Piaget usefully considered, in this regard, that the development of intelligence involves both assimilation and accommodation (Piaget, 1928) and that, in other words, the individual doesn't just acquire a new mental schema but changes, through accommodation, his or her existing schemas in order to anchor the new into the old. Of course, there are other possibilities opened up by learning and intelligent behaviour; for instance, the new stimulus can be explored and transformed before it changes existing knowledge. Also, we can question whether 'pure' assimilation exists in the sense of adopting the new without any additions or emergent processes. To learn, thus, is not reduced to reproducing, within one's mind, what already exists in the world or the minds of others; it is necessarily a dynamic, adaptive, and transformation process in which learners consider not only what is the case, but also what could be and how things become.

This possibility-based understanding of learning has been central to an educational psychology focused on teacher–student interactions within both formal and informal contexts. Just like general psychology, this branch uses different approaches – from behaviourist to cognitivist and experiential – in order to derive principles for education. Some of these, as noted before, can be more restrictive of the possible, especially those operating with the basic stimulus–response schema of conditioning. This is how, for example, educators are often accused (still) of harming rather than enhancing their students' creativity and imagination (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). It is the emphasis on rote memory and the reproduction of knowledge without any significant transformation that underpins this critique. And yet, if we look towards operant forms of conditioning, we soon notice that learners do have some agency in determining their own 'stimulations'. These insights have been carried over by Bandura (2001) into his social cognitive theory. This approach is based on the bi-directional relation between person and environment and brings to the fore those mental constructions and anticipations that drive our behaviour and, ultimately, our success in education and beyond. Self-efficacy, for instance, is a concept based on the incorporation of possibility within one's self understanding (see the dedicated entry in this encyclopedia). These conceptions are not new. Lev Vygotsky, from the first half of the 20th century, promoted a sociocultural view of learning and education based on the zone

of proximal development (see as well the dedicated entry in this encyclopedia) or the notion that learning drives development by creating a space of possibility for our actions, especially when interacting with others (or more capable peers, in Vygotsky's terms).

New questions for learning and educational psychologists when it comes to human possibility have to do with the role of power and inequality in society and how these impact what learners (and teachers alike) can think and do. Paolo Freire raised this important issue decades ago (Freire, 1973) and his efforts to work with marginalised and oppressed communities towards their emancipation resonate today with the struggle against oppression and discrimination of many people around the world. Pedagogies of the possible (see Glăveanu, in press) can only be based on a critical understanding and engagement with the world in order to reimagine it through the process of learning and education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, psychology as a multi-faceted discipline has a lot to offer any scholar interested in possibility studies. By focusing on the mental states, actions and experience of people in a variety of contexts, as well as across time, psychology is also very close to other disciplines and their own approaches to the possible. For example, general psychology is connected to philosophy, as the two disciplines have been historically. Cognitive psychology builds on the achievements of cognitive science, neuroscience and artificial intelligence. Social and sociocultural psychology are close to sociology and anthropology, organisational psychology to management, and educational psychology to pedagogy and the sciences of education. In each case, psychologists can inform and also learn from the approaches and findings of connected disciplines. This is how, for example, the possibility-related vocabulary used by psychologists (including divergent thinking, self-efficacy, counterfactual thinking, etc.), can be enriched by philosophical approaches to the imagination, managerial views of innovation or sociological studies of agency and structure.

If psychology is to fully contribute to these dialogues, however, it needs to strengthen its commitment to a dynamic and relational ontology (Slife, 2004) and an epistemology that considers the world as mobile, multiple, and open to the possible and to the future. We also need to develop methodological tools that don't immediately stabilise or reify reality but allow us to study psychological phenomena as they emerge and develop in (inter)action. This kind of work is underway in many subdisciplines of psychology and we can hope that the notion of human possibility will continue to inspire theoretical development, empirical research and, most of all, the practice of psychologists in the 21st century.

Cross-references: self-efficacy, old age, pedagogies of the possible, zone of proximal development, creative self efficacy, tolerance for ambiguity, curiosity, emotion, unconscious, flow, imagination, imagery, creativity, life-course, Sigmund Freud, Lev Vygotsky, Paolo Freire.

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