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Dimensions of Personhood in Cultural Heritage: Who (or What) Gets to Be Called a Person?

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# Introduction & Theoretical Framework

When institutions were autonomous, the scope and definitions of fundamental concepts were developed to some degree within the framework of their own domains. An archivist could define and use the concept of “date” differently than did a database designer. In an era of active global, networked environments, however, data sharing and reuse have exposed new implications of varying and possibly contradictory ways in which key concepts are defined and described, either overtly or inadvertently.

In this paper we investigate personhood as an example of such a fundamental concept: what is a person, and who gets to be described as one? The answer may appear straightforward, but is in fact less objective than it seems. The concept has been challenged and debated in fields including philosophy, theology, anthropology, medicine, and law, with varying results (Carrithers, Collins, and Lukes 1985). Variations in the way persons are described, represented, and discussed take on new significance in emerging online environments predicated on reusing and sharing data from disparate sources. These variations and their potential conflicts are of particular interest given the importance and difficulty of personal identity management in the Semantic Web (McCusker and McGuinness 2010, 2). More broadly, varying conceptions of personhood have pertinent implications for the future world of complex debates about identity, and perhaps more important, the rights that are associated with being a person.

For the present work, we limit our examination of personhood to one multi-dimensional domain: cultural heritage, which encompasses the study, preservation, and curation of cultural practices and resources (UNESCO 2019). This space is complex and distributed, with work carried out by information institutions such as libraries, archives, and museums. Such institutions have devoted a great deal of energy to procuring, organizing, representing, managing, and providing access to resources, generating vast amounts of metadata in the process. Not only are persons the intended end users for such data through discovery tools such as catalogs and finding aids, they themselves are the subjects of cultural heritage metadata as well. For instance, libraries describe the persons who create intellectual works, while archives use oral histories to depict a person’s lived experiences (Dobreski and Kwaśnik 2018, 658).

In representing persons, cultural heritage institutions must draw lines around what a person is, even if somewhat unintentionally. These definitions are most explicit in knowledge organizing tools and systems used to help institutions describe, categorize, and represent resources of interest (Zeng 2008, 161). As such, we chose these tools and systems as our site of examination, systematically and critically reviewing and comparing their conceptions of personhood. From our findings we offer a preliminary inventory of dimensions of personhood illustrating key points of agreement and conflict around this concept within just this one domain. These dimensions provide a means for further, future work examining personhood in cultural heritage as well as other spaces.

# Research Questions & Methodology

In this study we set out to explore the ways in which personhood is construed within cultural heritage knowledge organization. Taking the form of conceptual models, controlled vocabularies, and cataloging codes, the systems and tools used for knowledge organizing provide a means for producing data about entities of interest and, as such, also serve as sites of definition.

We canvassed a range of cultural heritage systems and tools that are used for representing information about persons and their identities. These included conceptual models, such as the Library Reference Model (LRM), content standards, such as Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO), and ontologies, such as Friend-of-a-Friend (FOAF). Our rationale in choosing specific sources included their familiarity and usage in libraries and other cultural heritage settings, their accessibility, and their inclusion of a formal definition for the concept of “person” along with concrete examples.

In total, we identified nine sources. From their official specifications we then collected the full definition of “person.” These sources, along with key phrases excerpted from their definitions, are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Sources and excerpts from “person” definitions.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **System/Tool** | **Definition Key Phrases** |
| BIBFRAME | Individual or identity established by an individual (either alone or in collaboration) |
| Cataloging Cultural Objects (CCO) | ...individuals whose biographies are well known ... and creators with identified oeuvres but whose names are unknown and whose biography is estimated or surmised ... limited to real, historical persons |
| CIDOC Conceptual Reference Model (CIDOC-CRM) | ...real persons who live or are assumed to have lived. Legendary figures that may have existed, such as Ulysses and King Arthur, fall into this class if the documentation refers to them as historical figures. |
| Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS) | an individual of the human species … these definitions disallow the creation of headings for personas, bibliographic identities, and animals |
| Friend-of-a-Friend (FOAF) | Something is a Person if it is a person. We don't nitpic about whether they're alive, dead, real, or imaginary.  |
| Library Reference Model (LRM) | ...real persons who live or are assumed to have lived. Strict proof of the existence of a person is not required… however, figures generally considered fictional, literary, or purely legendary are not considered instances of the person entity. |
| Resource Description and Access (RDA) | An individual or an identity established by an individual, either alone or in collaboration with one or more other individuals |
| Schema.org | A person (alive, dead, undead, or fictional) |
| WIKIDATA | being that has certain capacities or attributes constituting personhood  |

We systematically examined the full definition from each source, comparing and contrasting them in order to identify key criteria by which an entity might or might not be considered a person. We then worked to group these criteria into broader themes capable of capturing integral aspects of personhood in this domain.

# Research Results & Discussion

From these criteria around personhood, we distilled an initial inventory of dimensions of personhood, including life, actuality, biology, agency, and individuality (see Table 2).

Table 2. Dimensions of personhood in cultural heritage.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Dimension** | **What Qualifies as a Person?** | **What Does Not?** |
| Life | living, once living, assumed to have lived | fictional, not/never living |
| Actuality  | real, exists, existed | fictional, imaginary |
| Biology | human species | animals, personas, spirits |
| Agency | works known, creative capacity | no creations/capacity |
| Individuality | individual, individual identity | unidentified, undifferentiated |

These dimensions encapsulate key criteria for personhood while also highlighting points of alignment or conflict among its definitions in this domain. Not all definitions of personhood give equal importance to each of these five dimensions. For instance, a legendary figure such as Merlin may only meet the requirements of three of these dimensions (biology, agency, individuality). As such, Merlin would be considered a person in the FOAF and Schema.org ontologies, but he would not be a person in the conceptual model LRM or the content standard CCO. Implications for data sharing are already apparent: even within cultural heritage data, the same entity may gain or lose personhood depending on the system and setting.

In the full version of this paper, we will go beyond this initial, surface view to take a deeper analytical dive into these five dimensions. Comprehensive discussion will be guided by the larger questions: why do such differences in definition exist, and what purposes do they serve? We will provide a closer look at the scope and purpose of each of the nine consulted sources, as well as how we think the role of personhood fits into their underlying goals. From here, we will examine each of the five dimensions and how they play out across the cultural heritage domain through these knowledge organizing tools and systems. While this work will provide new insights into personhood and the implications of variation in the definitions of fundamental concepts, we also expect to offer new questions and opportunities to build off of in future work.

# Conclusion

Why is the concept of personhood in cultural heritage worth further examination? Discrepancies in the definition of a person are not insignificant, and represent more than a mere curiosity. We believe that understanding more about how persons are conceptualized and described can provide valuable, tangible insight into patterns of data use and reuse in the Semantic Web, along with emerging trends of interest around identity and creativity, including non-human creators, recreated actors, AI agents, and computational creativity. The dimensions of personhood presented here offer an analytical frame that can facilitate further exploration and discussion of persons, creative responsibility, and related concepts within cultural heritage, along with their significance and implications.

In order to accomplish this, future work by researchers in the cultural heritage space must continue tracing out the distinctions among conceptions of personhood in two directions. First, tracing forward into contemporary practice to examine the implications for data creation, management, sharing, and reuse. And second, tracing back to better understand the historical development of the “person” in cultural heritage, and why differences have emerged or reconciled over time. The approaches and findings of these streams of work should also be applied beyond cultural heritage research to offer a fuller view of the ways in which personhood and other fundamental concepts vary across other domains.

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