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Cantor, Nancy

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Nancy Ellen Cantor, a leading proponent of the cognitive social-psychological approach to personality, and visionary university administrator, was born in New York City on April 2, 1952. Her mother, Marjorie, was a social worker who became a professor at Fordham University and served as president of the Gerontological Society of America; her father, Aaron, was an attorney. Educated at the Ethical Culture Schools, she received her AB in psychology from Sarah Lawrence College in 1974, and her PhD from Stanford University in 1978. She has held faculty positions at Princeton University (Assistant Professor, 1978–1981, Associate Professor, 1981–1983, Professor, 1991–1996) and the University of Michigan (Professor, 1987–2001). At Michigan, she was also Dean of the Horace Rackham School of Graduate Studies (1996–1997) and Provost (1997–2001). She subsequently served as Chancellor of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (2001–2004), and Chancellor and President of Syracuse University (2004–2013). Since 2014, she has been Chancellor of Rutgers University – Newark. She is married to Steven Brechin, an environmental sociologist at the New Brunswick campus of Rutgers, whose research focuses on climate change, conservation, and organizations across the globe. They have two children: Madeleine, who works with developers of digital resources for K-12 education, and Archie, an advocate for people on the autism spectrum.

Cantor began graduate school as a cognitive psychologist, working with Ewart Thomas on aspects of time perception. In a series of experiments, they showed that the perceived duration of a time period depended on both the quantity and quality of information processing transpiring during that interval (Cantor and Thomas 1977). Soon, however, Cantor shifted her focus to personality and social psychology, intrigued by Walter Mischel's efforts to apply the insights of cognitive and social psychology to the study of personality. At Ohio State, Mischel had been a student of both Julian Rotter, who brought cognitive constructs like expectations into social learning theory, and George Kelly, whose theory of personal constructs was the first thoroughly cognitive theory of personality. In his classic monograph on *Personality and Assessment* (1968), Mischel had published a trenchant critique of traditional personality psychology, arguing that personality was not as consistent across situations as the Doctrine of Traits seemed to imply. Instead, Mischel argued that interpersonal behavior was highly flexible across situations. Often mischaracterized as a "situationist," to the contrary he was always clear that this flexibility was rooted in the individual's *perception* of the situation – meaning that the

real locus of action was internal, not external, to the person. It was a perfect match for a budding young psychologist interested in perception and other aspects of cognition.

Other people are an important part of the situation, which makes person perception, normally a topic in social psychology, a problem for the psychology of personality as well. For the most part, studies of person perception followed traditional personality psychology in focusing on traits – in terms of "The Big Five," for example, how we judge whether people are extraverted, neurotic, agreeable, conscientious, and open to experience. Traits are usually viewed as lying on a continuum from low to high, but Cantor understood, as Jerome Bruner had pointed out, that every act of perception is an act of categorization. When we perceive some person, object, or event, we classify it as similar to other entities that we already know about, and different from still others. Accordingly, Cantor decided to study how we classify other people into qualitative "types." In this project, Cantor drew upon work by Eleanor Rosch, who had recently overturned 2500 years of received wisdom about concepts and categories. Ever since Aristotle, scholars had construed concepts as proper sets, represented by collections of "defining" features that were singly necessary and jointly sufficient to identify an object as a member of a category. That is a very logical way to organize categories, but Rosch showed that the mind actually does something different. Mentally, natural categories are represented by prototypes, summaries of the "typical" category member, whose features are only imperfectly correlated with category membership.

Cantor hypothesized that this was true for person categories, as well. In a series of studies, she showed that common person categories were, in fact, organized as "fuzzy" sets, with various instances sharing a family resemblance but having no single feature, or package of features, in common (Cantor and Mischel 1979a; see also Cantor et al. 1982a; Niedenthal and Cantor 1984). She also showed that there is an intermediate, or "basic" level of categorization which maximizes the richness, differentiation, vividness, and concreteness of information provided by the category.

For each category she studied, Cantor identified a prototype which possessed a maximum number of category-consistent features, as well as the maximal differentiation from contrasting categories. New instances are matched against this prototype to determine category membership. In other studies, she showed that these prototypes influence the anticipatory images that we form about people we are about to meet (Snyder and Cantor 1980), impression formation (Cantor and Mischel 1979b), person memory (Cantor and Mischel 1977), and social decision-making (Niedenthal et al. 1985), and partner choice in task performance (Cantor et al. 1984). Just as Kelly had argued in his theory of personal constructs, personality prototypes capture the "gist" of other people, providing us with information about what to expect of them.

Cantor and her colleagues also applied prototype analysis to psychiatric diagnosis, which she viewed as a special case of person perception (Cantor et al. 1980; see also Cantor 1982; Cantor and Genero 1986; Genero and Cantor 1987). Up to that point, the diagnostic categories were, at least implicitly, viewed as proper sets identified by defining features – as in Bleuler's "4 As" of schizophrenia. But she showed that when clinicians actually make diagnoses, they match their patient's symptoms to a prototype that represents the characteristic, if not defining, features of the target syndrome. By that time, Rosch's "prototype" view of categories was being challenged by an "exemplar" view which holds that categories are not represented by summary prototypes, but rather by specific examples of the class. Cantor and her colleagues showed that while novice diagnosticians rely on summary prototypes, such as one might glean from textbook descriptions, in making diagnostic decisions, experts tend to compare new patients to specific exemplars. In a coincidence of timing, in 1980 the American Psychiatric Association issued the third edition of its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*, which adopted the prototype view by describing the various syndromes of mental illness in terms of characteristic, frequently encountered, but not defining, symptoms.

Prototypes capture the gist of situations, as well, and Cantor subsequently applied the same methods – free-descriptions, ratings, and reaction-time measures – to the classification of everyday social occasions (Cantor 1981; Cantor et al. 1982b). As with persons, she showed that categories of social situations were organized as fuzzy sets, with no defining features, represented by prototypes summarizing the family resemblance among instances. Again, prototypes represented a basic level of object classification, maximizing the richness and distinctiveness of the features associated with the category. Their easy accessibility allows them to play a major role in helping people decide what kind of situation they are in, what is expected of them, and what they can do.

Finally, Cantor turned her attention to the self, as opposed to other people (Cantor et al. 1986; Kihlstrom and Cantor 1984; Kihlstrom et al. 1988). In common discourse, "self-concept" is often considered to be synonymous with self-esteem, but Cantor defined the self-concept literally as a *concept* – and, naturally, hypothesized that it too was organized as a prototype. Construing the self as a prototype inevitably raised the question: prototype *of what*? There are lots of extraverts and culture mavens, lots of parties and cultural events, from which summary prototypes can be extracted; but there is only one instance of the self. As a Mischel student, however, she recognized that individual behavior varies widely from one situation to another. This situational variability, in turn, may be represented in context-specific self-concepts that represent the individual's knowledge of what he or she is like – or, in the case of "possible" selves (Markus and Nurius 1986), *might* be like – in particular types of situations. These, in turn, are related to each other by the same principle of family resemblance, yielding a "prototypical self" whose characteristic features tend to appear, but not always, in the context-specific self-concepts. Structured as a prototype, the self-concept plays a role in getting acquainted, as when people seek information about another person that is relevant to their own self-concepts (Riggs and Cantor 1984), and in personal decision-making – as when people ask themselves whether a particular choice is right for "people like me."

For Cantor, personality and social psychology are not fields apart but are rather intimately related, because personality expresses itself in social behavior (Cantor 1990a; Snyder and Cantor 1998). Personality is not so much something that one *has*, such as a package of traits, as it is something one *does*, in the course of social interaction. Whereas evolutionary psychologists focus on the modern vestiges of archaic reproductive strategies, her focus is on "the proximate dynamics of human social behavior in contemporary, as opposed to ancestral, contexts" (Cantor 1990b, p. 246).

Cantor's efforts to integrate personality theory with cognitive and social psychology led her to reformulate the idea of social intelligence (Cantor and Kihlstrom 1987; Kihlstrom and Cantor 2018). Previous conceptions of social intelligence, dating back to the early twentieth century, drew an analogy to IQ, emphasizing individual differences in the ability to understand and manage people, and to engage in adaptive social interactions. This analogy led to the development of standardized assessments such as the George Washington Social Intelligence Test – as well as an enduring controversy over whether social intelligence is anything other than general intelligence applied to social situations. In contrast to this "ability view" of social intelligence, Cantor articulated a "knowledge view," based on an alternative meaning of "intelligence," referring to a body of information and knowledge. From a cognitive, social-psychological point of view, an individual's behavior in a social situation is determined by the knowledge, expectations, and beliefs that he or she brings into that situation. It follows, then, that individual differences in social behavior, which are the public expressions of personality, are determined by individual differences in the individual's fund of declarative and procedural knowledge about the social world. From the psychometric, ability-based view, the assessment of social intelligence involves questions whose answers are right or wrong. Rather than asking how socially intelligent a person *is*, compared to some norm, the knowledge view asks what social

intelligence a person *has*, with which to guide his or her interpersonal behavior. This declarative and procedural knowledge takes various forms, but some of it consists of prototypes of various types of persons (including the self and specific others, viewed in context) and situations.

Drawing on the work of Eric Klinger (1977) and Brian Little (1989), Cantor argues that social intelligence should be judged with respect to the person's own individual *life tasks*, *current concerns* or *personal projects* that give meaning to the individual's life, and provide a framework for organizing his or her everyday activities (Cantor 1994, 2000; Cantor and Fleeson 1994; Cantor and Harlow 1994; Cantor and Langston 1989). Life tasks provide an integrative unit of analysis for studying the interaction between the person and the situation. Life tasks afford coherence to personality: goal-relevant behavior is consistent across situations that are relevant to ongoing life tasks, and stable across intervals of time where particular life tasks are operative; when life tasks change, behavior changes as well. They also form the basis for long-term self-regulation, supplementing short-term strategies of behavioral manipulation and cognitive transformation (Mischel et al. 1996).

Cantor argues that individual differences in life tasks are most visible when the person is making a transition into a new institution or relationship. Some life tasks are common for people at a particular stage in life. But even at the same stage of life, different people will be engaged in different life tasks. Cantor and her colleagues have been particularly interested in the life tasks chosen by students making the transition from high school to college (Cantor et al. 1987). For some students, their principal life task revolves around achieving academic excellence in preparation for a future career; for others, their principal life task is of a more interpersonal nature, involving the establishment of an identity, figuring out how to live independently of one's parents, and creating a new circle of friends. Interestingly, a discrepancy between real and ideal selves has a negative effect in the academic domain but a positive one in the social domain. Cantor and her colleagues have been particularly interested in intimacy as a life task for students (Cantor et al. 1992; Cantor and Sanderson 1998; Sanderson and Cantor 2001; Sanderson et al. 1999). Whatever their life task is at any particular time, people are more emotionally involved in events that are related to it (Cantor et al. 1991).

In addition to her work promoting a social-cognitive approach to personality, Cantor has studied traditional topics in cognitive social psychology. With Mark Snyder, she showed that there is a confirmatory bias in retrieval of information from person memory (Snyder and Cantor 1979). Another study revealed constraints on the "fundamental attribution error," showing that observers are actually quite cautious and limited when making inferences about attitudes when targets behave under conditions of strong constraint (Cantor et al. 1982c).

Although Cantor has chiefly worked to connect personality to social cognition, she has not ignored emotion and motivation (Cantor 2003; Cantor and Zirkel 1990; Norem and Cantor 1990a; Showers and Cantor 1985). With Julie Norem, she coined the term "defensive pessimism" to refer to an adaptive strategy for coping with risky, anxiety-evoking situations: by setting low expectations, people can forestall threats to self-esteem; but, because it reduces stress and anxiety, the strategy can also lead to better performance (Cantor and Norem 1989; Norem and Cantor 1986a, b, 1990b). With Paula Niedenthal, she has examined how affective responses affect social perception and categorization (Isen et al. 1992; Niedenthal and Cantor 1986).

In 1980, while just an assistant professor, Cantor organized a conference in Princeton to explore the integration of research and theory in personality, cognitive, and social psychology (Cantor and Kihlstrom 1981). Another conference, held in Ann Arbor in 1988, brought together a more diverse group to discuss emerging directions in the psychology of personality (Buss and Cantor 1989). But a stint as associate dean at Michigan, followed by a turn as department chair at Princeton, revealed a talent for administration as well as teaching and research, and Cantor soon turned her attention in that direction.

Consistent with her views as a social psychologist, Cantor is committed to promoting diversity on campus. As Graduate Dean, and then as Provost, she joined Michigan President Lee Bollinger in two major defenses of affirmative action in higher education (Cantor 2004b, 2013; Zirkel and Cantor 2004). The first of these, *Gratz v. Bollinger*, concerned an undergraduate admissions policy that awarded extra points to applicants from certain underrepresented ethnic groups. It was initially filed in 1997 but did not reach the Supreme Court until the 2002–2003 term. The Court reaffirmed that race could be used as one factor in determining college admissions with the goal of increasing campus diversity, a position it had taken earlier in the *Bakke* and *Fisher* cases, but ruled 6–3 against Michigan's bonus system on the grounds that it did not involve the assessment of individual applicants. However, the second case, *Grutter* vs. *Bollinger*, concerning law-school admissions, was more successful. In a decision announced the same day as *Gratz*, the Court agreed that the University had a compelling interest in diversity, and that it was appropriate to consider race as a "plus factor" in admissions, so long as it and other factors were considered on an individual basis. In this way, the Michigan cases set the standard for race-conscious college admissions.

As the first woman to serve as Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Cantor promoted diversity among students and faculty, enhanced cross-disciplinary research activities, and used her skills as a social psychologist to facilitate a difficult dialog among students, faculty, and alumni concerning the University's controversial athletic mascot, Chief Illiniwek, who was eventually retired in 2007.

Cantor was also the first woman to serve as Chancellor and President of Syracuse University. While continuing to promote campus diversity, not least by broadening its geographic enrollment beyond its traditional Northeastern base, she increased the school's endowment and the size of both its faculty and student body and made the University a resource for the economic redevelopment of its surrounding, older, industrial region (Cantor 2004a). Cantor called for a new "Morrill Act" (the Civil War-era legislation that created the land-grant universities) to support colleges that serve as "anchor institutions" in urban communities, promoting local development in a postindustrial knowledge economy, and serving as engines of social equality (Cantor 2009). Expanding on Kurt Lewin's ideas about "action research," she encouraged faculty colleagues to pursue publicly engaged scholarship in collaboration with other members of the community (Cantor and Englot 2016b; Cantor et al. 2013).

At Rutgers-Newark, Cantor has continued to develop the idea of anchor institutions and to promote publicly engaged scholarship. Working alongside civic leaders and local K-12 educators to connect gown to town, her university serves as a "social glue" to bring diverse constituencies together, promote a new form of urban equitable growth, and expand and strengthen the school-to-college pipeline (Cantor and Englot 2013, 2016a). To this end, Rutgers has created a new form of honors program, called the Honors Living-Learning Community, whose students must demonstrate not only excellent academic achievement but also a passion for social justice and a commitment to careers as agents of change. Cantor is coeditor of a book series, *Our Compelling Interests*, which promotes diversity as a strength that gives societies a competitive edge (Lewis and Cantor 2016).

In 1985, Cantor received the Distinguished Scientific Award for an Early Career Contribution to Psychology, in the area of personality, from the American Psychological Association. The award cited her efforts to carry "the concepts and principles of cognitive psychology to the study of personality and social interaction" and her research exploring "how we use social knowledge to solve life's mundane and monumental problems," which "radically altered the way we think about the way we think about ourselves and others." Recipient of many honorary degrees and other awards, for both research and service, she is a member of the National Academy of Medicine of the National Academies, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. When asked why she gave up a distinguished career in psychology to become a university president, she replies: "Are you crazy? I do psychology 24x7 in this job" (Cantor 2016, p. 493).

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