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How Do We Know a Person in Contemporary Frameworks for Personality?

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Both Dan McAdams and I have argued that the field of personality psychology is currently fragmented and needs to be integrated. Both he and I have introduced frameworks that we hope are useful to reorganizing the field of personality psychology. McAdams' framework is developed in the target article here, and my own framework is developed elsewhere (Mayer, 1993–1994, 1995a, 1995b). McAdams and I also both hope that our suggested reorganizations for the field will clarify the work within it and better communicate the discipline. Allegiance to my own work prompts me to acknowledge that my perspective on McAdams' framework may be biased, even though I enjoyed thinking about his work. From my perspective, McAdams' framework is more directed toward organizing our knowledge of the observer of personality than toward organizing the field of personality psychology as a whole. This interpretation is somewhat at variance with how McAdams views his own framework, and I discuss the basis for it in the next section; later on, I consider how McAdams's nonetheless substantial contribution can be integrated within the field.

McAdams's Framework As a Framework for the Psychology of the Observer

To me, the heart of McAdams's framework is found in his question, "What do we know when we know a person?" This is, I think, a brilliant and original starting point. To me, "What do we know when we know a person?" directs us toward understanding what contributes to the feeling of knowing another person. At the risk of oversimplifying McAdams's ideas, his frame-

work seems directed at establishing the human feeling of knowing someone in the context of a science that often renders the study of individuals sterile and uninteresting. McAdams intends to bring the person alive by knowing his or her life story.

The personality system exists in interaction with an observer who wants or needs to understand it. McAdams's framework describes how the observer moves from unfamiliar to intimate knowledge of another. The first part of his two-part framework begins with James's distinction between the "I" and the "Me." McAdams says the I tells a story about the Me, and this accounts for a person's creation of his or her life story. The framework's initial distinction between the I and the Me makes sense to me as an introduction to life stories; life stories are central to the framework because the feeling of knowing another comes from learning that person's life story. A framework intended to encompass all the field of personality would, however, require consideration of such other distinctions as the id–ego, conscious–unconscious, and public–private selves.

The second part of McAdams's framework is a continuum of knowing that is characterized at one end by what an observer knows of a stranger and at the other end by what an observer knows of an intimate acquaintance. McAdams's depiction of the continuum focuses in part on the observer's relation to the person; McAdams also characterizes the continuum by how contextualized information is. He states that when an observer knows a stranger, the knowledge is general, noncontextual, and characterized by traits (Level 1). As the observer learns more, it will be about partly contextualized schema such as the person's goals and plans, termed *personal concerns* (Level 2). The observer's

intimate knowledge of others is specific, fully contextualized, and exemplified by the individual's life stories (Level 3). In my estimation, this continuum accurately describes the observer's knowledge of someone's personality, rather than describing the actual personality itself.

For one thing, a considerable number of personality components that I think of as less knowing-related, such as memory and emotion, are excluded. For example, expressions of happiness or depression can be discerned on occasion whether we know someone well or not; these are omitted from the continuum. Moreover, McAdams's framework seems more focused on the observer's feeling of knowing than on real knowing. Some people have been charmed by the life story of a sociopath; a clinician who knows that an individual possesses a sociopathic test profile will have knowledge of that individual—based on traits—that is far more accurate than that gained from the life story. Although knowing another's story may help bring the person alive, as McAdams notes, it may be insufficient to organize the person's entire personality. Think about the difference between McAdams's question, "What do we know when we know a person?" and a more standard "What is personality?" In my reading, at least, the latter question leads to the more general framework. It is for all the previous reasons that I have interpreted McAdams's framework as describing the observer of personality, but not describing personality as a whole.

The framework could use further clarification even as a depiction of the observer. The claim that we know strangers' traits and intimates' life stories seems reasonable to me, but it also seems to me that at least sometimes the reverse may occur. We might know parts of the life story of a public figure without knowing that figure well just as we may abstract behaviors from the life story of an intimate to conclude he or she possesses the trait of honesty. McAdams himself appears to mix levels when he reports his empirical findings that generative life stories contain themes of redemption; redemptive themes seem like the midlevel constructs he terms the personal concerns of Level 2. Further consideration of these issues would be desirable.

McAdams's Contribution

McAdams's framework for understanding the observer is nonetheless important. The personality psychologist is an observer of others par excellence; it is therefore important to understand such observer psychology. McAdams argues that personality psychologists should provide a science that includes a feeling of knowing others or else explain why such a goal is

inappropriate to the science. I would wager that many of us are tempted to deny responsibility for communicating a feeling of knowing people to our students and colleagues. To add such a feeling-of-knowing to the science, we reason, is like eating sweets rather than something more nutritious. We tell ourselves that feelings of knowing may arise from cognitive illusions rather than from real science, and indeed, some research indicates that at least some feelings of knowing are illusory (e.g., Chapman & Chapman, 1969; Nisbett & Ross, 1980). This oppositional response, however, may be in part a defense against the difficulty of bringing personality alive. McAdams's empirical studies of life stories suggest both that the feeling of knowing and the science of knowing can sometimes be integrated—just as an apple crisp mixes sweets and fruits.

The Psychology of the Observer and Frameworks of Personality

The Dominant Personality Framework

If McAdams's framework is insufficiently large to organize the whole field, then how shall we proceed given the state of personality today? McAdams's critique of present-day personality psychology seems accurate. The field is fragmented, with schisms between individual theories, between individual research topics, and between theories and research (e.g., Mendelsohn, 1993). Personality's dominant framework today is a multiple-perspective one that examines a sequence of historically ordered perspectives on personality such as the psychodynamic, humanistic, trait, and so forth. McAdams's work could easily be included in such a progression by placing him in a "Lifespan Development" perspective with Erikson, for example. But this framework provides little or no integration across perspectives despite the fact that such integration would be reasonable and possible. The fragmented, piecemeal field that McAdams described still exists.

The System-Topics Alternative

One method for reorganizing personality psychology is according to a system-topics framework (e.g., Mayer, 1995a). This framework takes its name from the major topics commonly employed to describe complex systems such as personality; the framework arranges those topics progressively so that earlier topics introduce material that later topics expand on. The system's four major topics concern (a) personality's definition and location amid other systems; (b) the components of

the personality system; (c) how personality components are organized within the system, as well as in relation to neighboring systems; and (d) personality development. Elsewhere I have argued that such a framework provides a much more integrated picture of the personality system than the multiple-perspective approach. I believe it also would be enriched by a consideration of the issues that McAdams has raised. Because the system-topics framework is progressive, it is possible to discuss McAdams's contribution at least within the first system topic (definition and location of personality) so as to suggest how McAdams's work might be integrated in the system as a whole.

The first, introductory systems-topic includes the definition of personality and a statement concerning its position amid its neighboring systems. For example, scientists often locate systems in relation to others according to molecular–molar and internal–external continua. Along the molecular–molar continuum, personality has at its molecular end its neurobiological underpinnings and at its molar end family and larger social systems. Along an internal–external dimension, personality extends from its innermost parts (often identified as the conscious self) to a sensory–motor boundary with the outside world and beyond. One of McAdams's substantial contributions is his recognition that the life story can be viewed as a structure within the person, but that it will also often reflect the outside historical events that a person has undergone. By making a clear distinction between inside and outside, the life story (internal) can be clearly distinguished from the life history (external), and the issue (raised by McAdams), “To what extent do life story and life history converge?” becomes clarified and of importance.

Also, as the personality system is introduced, one can take stock of McAdams's reminder that the personality system is defined by the other personality systems that observe it. Each personality exists in relation to other personality systems. Recall that McAdams is asking personologists to consider what gives us the feeling of knowing another. From McAdams's perspective, personality psychology tries to determine what creates an intimate connection between one personality system and the next (and then provide our students with the feeling of knowing others). In personality terms, what parts of one personality need to be connected to the other? Can this interpersonal connection be made through scientific descriptions and, if so, what type of descriptions? Is direct observation sometimes necessary? Do certain parts of the target individual's life (or life story) need to be revealed, and if so, which parts? What role do the observer's implicit personality theories play in the sense of knowing? What happens to two people during the process of social comparison, inti-

macy, or love, that makes one person feel a knowing connection to another?

If these ideas were to be further refined, they could be carried into the system-topics frameworks' second topic, Personality Components. There, most of McAdams's components (e.g., life stories, James's I and Me, redemption themes, etc.) would be discussed, possibly along with some others relevant to the person-as-observer such as transference schemata, implicit personality theories, and so on. The third system-topic, Organization, might show how two different personalities are joined together to create the sense of knowing between them. The fourth and final topic, Development, might examine how definitions of knowing another might change through the lifespan. This is just a suggestion of where work on interpersonal knowing might fit into a system-topics approach. It is worth concluding with a few additional remarks on McAdams's work.

Concluding Comments

McAdams's framework is a creative and novel approach that attempts to breathe life into a fragmented and often-sterile field of personality psychology. McAdams has posed a creative and original question: “What do we know when we know a person?” He has, in my view, created a framework to study the observer of persons and the observer's connection to those persons. In so doing, he has challenged us to create an enhanced feeling of knowing people in our field. McAdams has also suggested that the way to do this is to look at the life stories inside the person because they reflect the life histories outside the person. I am not sure that an examination of life history is the only or best way to breathe life into the field. Life histories (which are reflected in life stories) may be too independent of a person's personality. Predicting from personality to life history is like predicting from the shape of a leaf to where it will land on a wind-swept plain. We may understand the laws of motion, gravity, aerodynamics, and so forth. But the leaf's shape is too irregular, and the winds are too complex, to make more than a probabilistic statement as to whether the leaf will end up underfoot, or far, far away. Of course, we are limited to probabilistic statements in most areas of personality psychology because the system we study is so complex. Certainly, however, studying life stories is worthwhile and is at least one place to bring the person to life. This and other avenues for bringing our person alive may be helped, as McAdams has suggested, by better understanding what turns on the observer of others—what happens when the observer intimately knows a person.

Note

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Integrating the Levels of Personality

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In 1992, the American Psychological Association sponsored a day of invited addresses on the topic "Can personality change?" (Heatherton & Weinberger, 1994). In an attempt to reconcile the overwhelming longitudinal evidence for the stability of adult personality with the indisputable fact that people do change their activities, attitudes, plans, and purposes, two of the addresses sketched models of personality that distinguish between those aspects of the person that readily change and those that do not. McAdams (1992), whose chief interest is in life narratives, introduced the three-leveled model he elaborates in the target article; trait psychologists Costa and McCrae (1994) presented a somewhat more elaborate scheme that showed hypothesized interrelations among several categories of variables relevant to understanding the person (see McCrae & Costa, 1995, 1996).

Coming as they did from personologists with dramatically different orientations, these two models showed remarkable similarity. McAdams's Level 1, traits, corresponded to a category Costa and McCrae called basic tendencies; Level 2, contextualized concerns, corresponded to their characteristic adaptations; and Level 3, life narratives, to their self-concept. Both speakers proposed that personality traits (Level 1) were essentially stable, whereas concerns/adaptations and life narratives (Levels 2 and 3) were considerably more malleable.

I regard the construction of these frameworks as a most encouraging sign of the maturing of the field of personality psychology. In a discipline whose history has been marked since the days of Freud and Jung by rancorous disputes between rival schools, these efforts at bridging divergent perspectives on the person are refreshing. There are differences between the two models that I discuss in some detail (see also McAdams, 1995), but ultimately I believe the similarities are more important. By distinguishing among different aspects of psychological functioning, we can broaden the scope of personality psychology while still maintaining an integrated view of the person.

Trait Influences on Level 2

McAdams's levels are narrower than their counterparts in Costa and McCrae's framework. Personality traits are only a subcategory of basic tendencies, which also include other potentials of the individual (e.g., sensory-motor capacities, physiologic drives, musical talent). Again, strivings, goals, and concerns—McAdams's Level 2—form only part of the category of characteristic adaptations, alongside such acquired features as knowledge of French, health habits, and professional roles. Life narratives can be seen as a specialized aspect of the self-concept, which also

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