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

includes self-esteem and beliefs about one's traits and adaptations. McAdams has chosen to concentrate on the variables of most interest to contemporary personality psychologists, ignoring less immediately relevant aspects of the person.

He also seems to have differentiated his levels operationally: Traits can be assessed by checklists, concerns require attention to temporal and other contexts, and life stories can only be properly studied as narratives. Costa and McCrae attempted a more purely logical categorization, distinguishing abstract possibilities from concrete realizations from reflexive representations. For Costa and McCrae, traits are not descriptive summaries of behavior that give a crude approximation to what the person is like, but hypothetical constructs thought to give rise to, and thus to explain, the individual's characteristic adaptations (McCrae & Costa, 1995).

These two different approaches suggest very different assumptions about the relations between levels or categories and have very different implications for how personality psychologists ought to go about their work. McAdams asserts that the three levels are "relatively independent." It is perfectly possible (and in fact a common practice) to study trait adjectives or personal strivings or life stories in isolation, without any attention to how these different aspects of the person might interact. Indeed, McAdams thinks this may be the best way to proceed at present. Strategic concerns and life narratives, he argues, are comparatively new kinds of constructs that require their own "indigenous theoretical framework"; in consequence, it is premature (and perhaps a dangerous reductionism) to attempt to relate them to the better known level of traits.

Costa and McCrae, by contrast, are eager to link traits to characteristic adaptations, without which traits would remain abstract and unknowable potentials. Within their framework, the only way to learn if people are extraverted is to make inferences from their preferences, habits, strivings, lifestyles, and attitudes (or let them make the inference by rating themselves on extraversion). Personality dispositions and their contextualized manifestations are inextricably, if often implicitly, linked.

These two positions are not entirely incompatible if they are properly understood. There is a large literature showing empirical associations between traits and measures of needs, motives, and values (e.g., Burger, 1995; Sadowski & Cogburn, 1995), and I do not think that McAdams would contest the claim that traits affect characteristic adaptations. Conversely, Costa and McCrae certainly do not expect a one-to-one correspondence between those two levels. Career plans may sometimes be shaped by parental example rather than personal preference. A naturally trusting person may learn to be guarded in hostile settings. Attitudes can be formed by persuasive communications that may have nothing to do with the individual's personality. Thus, Level 2 variables cannot be entirely explained by personality traits, and a complete account of the person must go beyond trait psychology.

However, there is more at stake here than simply the percent of variance that traits can account for—a percent that can be arbitrarily increased by aggregating across domains, occasions, and roles. I believe that McAdams wishes to make a different point—namely, that it may be worthwhile for personality psychologists to disaggregate goals, concerns, and motives, and study them in their own right. Given the observations that Person X plans to become a social worker, has humanitarian values, and is currently concerned about the welfare of a cat that recently strayed into the neighborhood, we might (probably correctly) infer that X is high in trait Agreeableness. McAdams's point is that if this is all we learn from these observations, then we have thrown away a great deal of information to which personality psychologists should attend.

Exactly how contextualized information should be used scientifically is not yet clear to me. A friend or biographer or psychotherapist may need such concrete details to understand the person's life, but how can research psychologists use them to formulate general principles about personality? One possibility is to focus not on the idiosyncratic content of Level 2 variables, but on their dynamic operation. How do current concerns succeed each other in time? How do people create life plans? How do they deal with conflicting priorities? These are the kinds of issues that Murray and Kluckhohn (1953) hoped to address with concepts like proceedings, serials, and schedules. These dynamic processes are surely within the purview of personality psychology, especially because they are themselves influenced by basic personality traits—efficiency in making and following life plans, for example, is a hallmark of Conscientiousness.

Traits and Level 3

McAdams devotes most of his article to Level 3, life narratives, the focus of most of his own research. He proposes that persons—at least modern adults—conceive of themselves in terms of a life story that gives a sense of unity and purpose. Just as a typical clinical case study includes not only a personality test profile but also a narrative life history, so the self-concept includes both a collection of attributes the individual claims and a life story that tells how he or she is progressing through life.

Few would quarrel with the statement that people can and do tell stories about their lives and that the ability to do so is somehow central to having a meaningful identity. There are even those peculiar and fascinating pathologies of autobiographical memory, the amnesias, that suggest what life without a life story might be like. But despite years of research (e.g., Lieberman & Falk, 1971), surprisingly little is actually known about the origin, nature, or function of life stories, and I do not yet know quite what to make of them: Are life stories the unifying themes that guide our life, as the jet stream guides weather systems, or are they mere epiphenomena, more-or-less adequate rationalizations and secondary elaborations that convey the gist of our life history in a form suitable for the occasion?

Most of the literature on life narratives is theoretical, rather than empirical. McAdams, himself an expert storyteller, has generated appealing hypotheses about how life narratives are related to other psychological and cultural phenomena, but it is crucial to recall that most of these are, so far, only hypotheses. It is a stroke of brilliance to propose that optimistic or pessimistic narrative tone, perhaps the most elemental aspect of the life story, is set by the infant's early experiences of attachment. But there is no supporting evidence. No one has conducted a longitudinal study linking infant experience to adult narrative tone, and modern behavior genetics casts considerable doubt on whether such a hypothesis would in fact be supported (Rowe, 1994).

Again, McAdams lists a set of criteria by which the maturity or mental health of a life narrative might be judged, but he cites no evidence that individuals who have coherent, open, credible life stories are actually mentally healthier than others. Indeed, a study by Lieberman and Falk (1971) found "little evidence that reminiscence phenomena were related to other measures of psychological well-being" (p. 138). A comparison with the "psychoanalytic cure" does not help much; most empirically oriented psychologists have long been skeptical that such a thing exists (Eysenck, 1952). I am not arguing that narratively satisfying life stories are irrelevant to mental health; I only note that research to date has not adequately addressed this question.

In fact, basic issues of reliability and validity have rarely been addressed in this research tradition (D. P. McAdams, personal communication, July 12, 1995). The literature on retrospective reports (Gerlsma, 1994) suggests that the factual accuracy of life stories is often questionable. We know that people tell somewhat different stories on different occasions, but we do not know the 6-month retest reliability of narrative tone, or agentic themes, or characteristic imagery. If a different life story is elicited on every different occasion, it is unlikely that any one of them will be a meaningful predictor of other variables. Commendably, McAdams and his colleagues are beginning to report psychometrically rigorous studies of the properties of life narratives (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1995; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996), but there is a long way to go before we have a clear grasp of what, if anything, the study of life stories will yield beyond their own intrinsic interest.

As with Level 2, McAdams claims that Level 3 variables are relatively independent of Level 1 variables, traits—although he concedes that "even [sic] personality types" might be associated with particular types of life stories. Personality traits are pervasive, enduring aspects of people's lives, spontaneously mentioned in descriptions of the self (McCrae & Costa, 1988), and no credible life narrative could entirely avoid them. Without suggesting that life stories are nothing but reflections of personality traits, let me offer a few specific hypotheses linking these two levels of personality:

Neuroticism should be related to narrative tone and to tragic versus comic themes. The life stories of psychotherapy patients are full of anguish and hopelessness and the same association of distress-proneness with negative narrative tone should surely also be seen in normal samples; indeed, one would begin to question the validity of codings of narrative tone if it were not. There is also reason to think that consistency and coherence in the life narrative would be inversely related to neuroticism (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993).

Extraversion, which includes both dominance and affiliation (Costa & McCrae, 1988), should be positively related to themes of both agency and communion (cf. McAdams et al.,1996). Extraverts might also tell more upbeat stories, and they are likely to be more willing—even eager—to talk about their lives (Cozy, 1973).

Openness may be a particularly important personality trait for understanding life narratives. It should be reflected in the ideological setting of the story (McCrae, in press), in the openness and rich differentiation of the narrative, in the vividness and creativity of the imagery used. When asked to "construct your world" with figurines in a sandtray, open individuals used more figures like wizards and unicorns (Lusebrink, 1994–95), perhaps suggesting a preference for what McAdams would call archetypal imagoes.

Agreeableness is seen in such specific traits as trust, nurturance, altruism, and tender-mindedness. It should be reflected in themes of communion (but not agency) and in the generative integration of the narrative. It is hard to imagine a cynic and misanthrope whose life story is about bequeathing benefits to personkind.

Conscientiousness might be seen in agentic themes (cf. McAdams et al., 1996) and perhaps also in the credibility of the story: Dutiful and diligent people might give more honest and accurate accounts of their life. In addition, the life stories of highly conscientious individuals are likely to show more temporal integration, as they progress steadily from goal to goal.

Trait psychology is often considered a dull and lifeless approach to personality, reducing a living, breathing being to a set of *T*-scores. In fact, however, traits take on meaning from their concrete manifestations, and these are often best illustrated by case studies. For example, anyone who wished to understand the construct of Openness to Experience could profitably begin by studying one of the greatest of life narratives, the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (McCrae, in press). For those whose conceptions of traits are grounded in such stories, the *T*-scores on a profile sheet come vividly to life. Like McAdams, I believe we should study all three levels of personality, but by all means, let us study them together.

Note

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