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Why Does Personality Psychology Exist?

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Why does personality psychology exist? Like every other field of research, personality psychology originated when people became curious about some phenomena, formulated questions, and started investigating. The basic questions that personality psychology arose to answer motivated the existence of the field in the first place, drive the interests of current researchers, and are the best means by which to entice newcomers into our field.

What are these questions? There seem to be about five, which subsume most of the issues that motivate curiosity about personality.

1. How are individuals different from each other?
2. How does behavior change?
3. How do people perceive, think, and plan?
4. How do people experience reality?
5. Why is it so difficult to understand even ourselves? Which leads to: What is going on in the unconscious, hidden part of the mind? (Freud believed that our frequent failure to fully understand our own thoughts and actions was sufficient evidence for the existence of unconscious processes.)

Most readers probably already have noticed that these basic questions map rather directly onto five familiar, basic approaches to personality psychology.[1] These are, respectively:

1. The trait approach, which includes the technology of personality assessment and psychometrics.
2. Behaviorism and the early versions of social learning theory.
3. The later versions of social learning theory and the newer cognitive approaches to personality such as those by Mischel, Cantor, and Kihlstrom. (I believe social learning theory provided a bridge by which the second question and associated research area evolved into the third.)
4. Phenomenological (also known as humanistic) psychology. (I include cross-cultural psychology here because the basic question that motivates it concerns the similarities and differences between the views of reality characteristic of different cultures.)

[1] Mayer refers to these basic approaches (although he lists only four of them) as "big perspectives" derived from Hall and Lindzey's (1957) pioneering table of contents. He allows that these big perspectives "provide more room for research coverage" (compared with Hall and Lindzey's original focus on individual theorists) but says little else about this way of organizing the field.

5. Psychoanalytic approaches. This includes the work of the Big Guy, Freud, but also others who have tried to get under the surface such as Jung, Adler, Horney, and more recent investigators such as Silverman, Weinberger, and Westen.

Each of the approaches just listed originally was introduced—and sometimes still is touted—as the all-inclusive approach to personality. However—and call me postmodernist if you must (cf. Mayer)—each has embedded within it a distinct set of assumptions and research methods that make these approaches difficult if not impossible to assimilate into each other. The five basic approaches comprise not five different answers to the same question, but five different questions! Moreover, each of these questions is not only important in its own right, but may be eternal.

I think that personality psychology—and especially its textbooks—can be organized fairly well around these five questions and their associated approaches. Admittedly, this organization entails five elements rather than Mayer's four, and does not lend itself so well to three-dimensional charts (which may or may not be a disadvantage). Also, the five topics overlap with each other somewhat—although probably no more than do Mayer's. But I think the five-way organization has a few distinct virtues:

1. Each topic addresses a naive question that is not only of time-tested interest to psychologists, but can immediately arouse interest in nonpsychologists (such as undergraduates and members of Congress, two of our most important constituencies). Mayer's four topics, despite their analytic rigor and clever organization, are not so immediately accessible. Indeed, it seems likely that a certain amount of preliminary instruction would be necessary before one could start teaching a newcomer about his scheme.

2. Teaching a personality course in terms of these five basic topics allows important theories—such as Freud's—and important research programs—such as Bandura's—to be presented in their entirety, rather than chopped up into little pieces that make it difficult to see the structure of the whole.

3. It is what we are doing already, for the most part. The vast majority of personality textbooks—including my own (Funder, 1997)—and course syllabi alike follow some version of the basic approaches outline presented earlier (so I guess I am a pretty conservative postmodernist).

Let me say a little more about this last part. I suspect that the main thing missing from many present textbooks and courses is the clear and explicit recognition that the basic approaches to personality they already cover address distinct, interesting, and intrinsically important questions about human nature. When an author or instructor simply grinds through the theorists or topics in a kind of mindless "if it's Tuesday this must be Jung" manner then students fail to understand how it all fits together. But if it can be reiterated that there is a certain number of basic things we all want to know, and that areas of theory and research have sprung up to address each of them, then this familiar organization can become much more coherent for student and psychologist alike than Mayer's portrayal might make it seem.[2]

I think this organization provides a more feasible way to introduce newcomers to our field, and to convince nonpsychologists that what we do is interesting and important, than does Mayer's more abstract scheme. I think it is also vastly superior to the perhaps fashionable "topics" approaches, promoted by other writers, that concentrate on current research to the neglect of classic perspectives and basic questions that have already stood the test of time—a test it seems doubtful most current research will pass.

In sum, I have my doubts that Mayer's scheme is a feasible way to organize textbooks or to communicate with nonpsychologists about why personality psychology matters. I also wonder whether it has the kind of robust staying power that the five-approaches organization has already demonstrated. However, Mayer's scheme remains an impressive and powerful analytic invention. For those already familiar with personality psychology, it provides a fascinating means to find common threads across approaches and identify areas both of research overlap and neglect. Mayer's scheme might also serve as a useful way to organize research reviews written for a professional audience, although that remains to be seen.

I agree with Mayer that McAdams' question—What do we know when we know a person?—is brilliant but nonetheless falls slightly short of being all-encompassing. A question that I think really can organize the field is, what do we want to learn about when we study personality psychology? The answers to this question explain why personality psychology exists and why it is important, organize both current and classical approaches and, perhaps most saliently for the present readership, determine the content of the research we decide to do each day.

[2]For my own attempt to prove this point in detail, please see Funder (1997).

Note

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What Is Personality Psychology?

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A mature discipline that cannot define its subject matter is like a sovereign country that has not defined its borders—although it has a sense of identity, the ambiguity at the edges invites hostile maneuvering. Mayer believes that personality psychology has an identity framework problem. Mayer is a serious scholar who has done a prodigious amount of reading; he proposes a well-thought-out model of the content of personality psychology, and he challenges others to provide a better one. In addition to registering general and enthusiastic approval of his project, I would make five further points.

First, his article points up the significance of this journal. Mayer raises a very important issue, but his article probably would not be published in a so-called mainstream journal like *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. We should all be grateful for the existence of *Psychological Inquiry* and the good judgment of the editor.

Second, personality psychology is not the only branch of psychology whose subject matter is poorly defined. What, for example, is the subject matter of social psychology? It seems to be an evaluation of how "situations" influence social behavior. But Hogan and Roberts (in press) noted that after 90 years, social psychology has yet to provide a taxonomy of situations; this suggests that (a) there is nothing in the world that actually corresponds to a situation, and (b) social psychology is defined operationally as that which social psychologists do.

Third, Mayer's complex and apparently exhaustive framework for the field is tied to the content of existing personality theories; it is an organization of the status quo. This means that, should an original theory be proposed, it would lie outside the framework and be defined out of existence. But as a wise man once remarked, "To put limits to speculation is treason to the future."

Fourth, my sense is that Mayer is not entirely successful in his effort to maintain a distinction between framework and theory. His relational system of personality constructs (cf. Table 2) looks very much like a prescription for a theory. He suggests that a competent theory must include a discussion of enablers (working memory), establishments (self-concept), types (extraversion), and agencies (superego). I have no problem with these requirements; my point is that the distinction between a formal, content-free framework, and the substantive requirements of a theory become blurred here.

Finally, I too have spent a good bit of time thinking about the definition and content of personality psychology. My views are rather different from Mayer's, but I can summarize them quickly, and this might be an appropriate occasion to do so (for more detail, see Hogan, 1976).

Personality psychology concerns analyzing the nature of human nature. The topic is of huge practical, moral, and political significance—virtually all public policy is predicated on assumptions about human nature—and personality psychology is the only empirical discipline that takes human nature as its explicit subject matter—which is why it is so important.

Studying human nature is not an ambiguous, formless, or open-ended pursuit. Rather, evolutionary theory defines the parameters of the discussion. It is a relatively straightforward task to analyze the design requirements of the species by asking what it is that we evolved to do. For some very interesting examples of this kind of analysis, I recommend Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989), Lykken (1995), and Simpson and Kenrick (1997).

I adopted a "history of ideas" approach to defining the content of personality psychology. In brief, the approach involves a content analysis in which one tries to identify the essential themes underlying the subject. Although some judgment is required, the reliability of the classification scheme can be readily established by

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