

# Dynamic, Contextual Approaches to Studying Personality in the Social World

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**ABSTRACT** This special issue of *Journal of Personality*, composed of eight original articles, attends to the intersection of intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. Articles adopt a contextual approach to personality with attention to the need to belong (and the lack thereof), self-presentation concerns and styles, sexuality, curiosity, self-regulatory strength and strategies, and dynamic methodologies and analyses to study people within relationships. In this introduction, we offer challenges and aspirational goals for personality science. In particular, we discuss the importance of context when conceptualizing and studying personality, the seduction of innovative methodologies and analytic procedures, and the value of focusing on people and heterogeneity in groups instead of simply variables. We hope that this collection of articles deepens personality science and reminds readers that to truly understand human beings, they cannot be divorced from their social milieu.

In December 2002, a special issue of *Journal of Personality*, edited by Dr. M. Lynne Cooper, focused on personality and close relationships. Since then there has been an explosion of advanced theories, measurement, research methodologies, and statistical analyses for conducting dynamic, fine-grained studies of how personality operates in the social world. There has never been a better time to address how personality processes affect responding in social contexts and how social contexts alter people's personality.

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Instead of reviewing what can be found in the accompanying articles, we offer challenges and aspirational goals for personality science. For some strange reason, personality science has always been subservient and often an afterthought to social, clinical, developmental, and biological realms of psychology. If researchers ask questions that are of concern to what occurs in “the real world,” it is unimaginable to ignore the centrality of the person. Consider the broad spectrum of researchers interested in situational contexts such as initial encounters among strangers, infidelities, amusement in school and work settings, or the efficacy and feasibility of specific therapeutic interventions. Regardless of the content being studied, personality is expressed, experienced, and shaped in social contexts. The ultimate research questions continue to be interactional in nature, best exemplified in clinical psychology by Gordon Paul (1969): “What treatment, by whom is most effective for this individual, with that specific problem, under what specific set of circumstances and how does it come about?” (p. 44). For scientists interested in educational settings and child development, the question might be modified as follows: “What types of environments and teachers are most effective for children with specific temperamental qualities, under what set of circumstances, that enhance child academic and social outcomes?” Despite recent reviews showing small to nil interaction effects in education (e.g., Pashler, McDaniel, Rohrer, & Bjork, 2008), social scientists still strive to answer these questions. Similar contextual modifications can be created for other psychological subdisciplines to address the synergy between actors, partners (other people), and situational variables in predicting personal or relational outcomes.

Social interactional processes are very complex, often involving multiple people engaging in a wide variety of different types of activities over time. Although most scholars examine means (central tendencies) or frequencies (number of occurrences), researchers have recognized the value of tackling the novel and challenging issues of stability, change, and durability of psychological experiences over time. These questions cannot be adequately addressed by asking a large group of people to complete a battery of self-report questions. We understand the convenience of this simplistic approach to operationalizing and studying personality; however, this approach is inherently limited. We offer the maxim that methods should be slaves to questions lest we find ourselves (rightfully) questioning why we are slaves to methods.

### Reconsidering the Nature and Assessment of Personality

The bar of what constitutes satisfactory research questions and methodologies changes as a field evolves. Often, the evolution shifts from vibrant to stagnant times. Wide-ranging methods employed in novel but appropriate circumstances represent these vibrant times, whereas stagnant questions or methods hamper scientific progress. Simply naming new constructs (e.g., emotional creativity) and creating questionnaires to measure them, for example, likely fits our characterization of stagnancy.

To be sure, global surveys provide useful information about how people differ from each other and how traits differentially predict certain outcomes. An implicit assumption of these assessment approaches and subsequent use of the information is that higher scores are better for “positively” valenced traits (e.g., agreeableness) and lower scores are better for “negatively” valenced traits (e.g., neuroticism)—in short, as main effects. A close examination of the evidence supports main effects in certain contexts but not others. Consider the notion that granting forgiveness to people who harm us has been associated with less distress and lower physiological stress responses (Allan & McKillop, 2010). However, in a 2-year prospective study of newlywed couples, forgiveness was only linked to high levels of sustained marital satisfaction when partners engaged in infrequent negative behaviors (e.g., expressions of contempt and disrespect), whereas when partners engaged in frequent negative behaviors, forgiveness was associated with steep declines in marital satisfaction over time (McNulty, 2008)—indicative of an interaction. That is, depending on the social context, personality traits might have positive or negative consequences for a person’s psychological, social, or physical well-being. Binary frameworks of “positive” or “negative” personality traits are inadequate when we embed people in important social contexts. These interactions require more thought and care prior to data collection.

We wonder when it is advantageous to study personality at a more molecular level of analysis. A person could argue that the ability to flexibly regulate behavior to meet the demands required of a given situation offers benefits above and beyond any particular personality trait (e.g., positive affectivity) or the reliance on any particular regulatory strategy (e.g., mindfulness; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Personality traits assessed at the global level seem to offer greater

utility when the interest is in comparisons among people across lengthy periods of time (e.g., comparing young adults after college on their ability to achieve successful balance among work, family, and leisure). For shorter-term outcomes such as effectiveness in a given situation, assessing within-person behavior patterns might be more appropriate. Only by collecting information on what people think and do in the moment can we capture dynamic constructs such as the degree to which people are able to exploit situations that offer potential positive reinforcement.

Going forward, researchers can assess personality as situationally based judgments, behaviors, and reactions as a complement to a trait approach. Assessing states and behaviors in the context of people's natural environment is a more difficult, resource-intensive strategy than asking people to complete a one-time questionnaire. Importantly, the relationship between retrospective reports of personality and online assessments of personality behaviors on multiple occasions across multiple days is often slight or insignificant. In the emotion literature, a consistent finding is that when comparing people, compared with the intensity of positive emotions, experiencing more frequent positive emotions is a better predictor of life satisfaction (e.g., Schimmack, 2003). However, when comparing two people with a similar frequency of positive emotions, the person with more intense positive emotional experiences consistently shows evidence of greater life satisfaction. These findings on the synergy of frequency and intensity could not be obtained by researchers using global surveys and coarse analytic techniques—both eliminating the opportunity to separate frequency, intensity, and context sensitivity of repeatedly measured behaviors and emotions.

A parsimonious way to describe our point is that context matters when trying to understand and modify people's personality—regardless of whether the target is momentary states, basic behavioral tendencies, strivings, or life narratives. An additional benefit of addressing people in context is that we can begin to truly address change as it naturally unfolds from one time point or situation to the next (Stone, Shiffman, Atienza, & Nebeling, 2007). When something beneficial happens in one situation and not another, we can uncover the psychological, social, and biological mechanisms that account for this variability. If context is not directly modeled, then we make an erroneous assumption that people are invariant across situations. These contextual contingencies were prominently highlighted by

Walter Mischel (1968) and continue to be an important contribution to psychological science.

Between-person approaches including the typical Five-Factor Model personality measures are static, designed to classify people with qualities that are stable across time and situations. We argue for the value of careful theorizing about where there is variability in personality. This includes measurement and research designs that match beliefs about sources of variability. If a personality researcher believes that there is meaningful variability in how a single person alters his or her behavior from one situation to the next (manifest indicators of his or her personality), then an optimal measurement and research design would address this source of variability (including personality behavior by situation interactions). If personality researchers believe that there is invariance in personality behavior across most situations, and their measurement approach reflects this conceptual framework, then their research will be better at detecting large sample (nomothetic) tendencies than an individual's (idiographic) tendencies. We suspect that most scientists are interested in what people do in a given situation and for allied health professionals, helping people modify their responses with the end goal of improving their global functioning; in short, both implications fall within our interests. A contextualized, between-person approach to personality requires fine-tuned assessment strategies that capture the most relevant information pertinent to differentiating people—whether the goal is to differentiate groups or individuals.

Within-person approaches have different assumptions and requirements. Critical to a within-person approach is that differences between people extend beyond differences in average response tendencies (such as endorsed kindness or anxiety). People differ in mean response tendencies, yet they also differ in variability in responses across situations (Cervone, 2005). These patterns are often idiosyncratic. For instance, I might experience more intense and lasting gratitude when given gifts by friends as opposed to strangers; you might have the opposite pattern. Sometimes these response patterns to situations are relatively uniform. For instance, people's behavior responses tend to show greater fluctuations when with other people versus being alone (Diener & Larsen, 1984). Existing findings suggest that the situation should often be part of the process of assessing personality (Cervone & Shoda, 1999; Mischel & Shoda, 1998). The ingredients of a situation activate what we think and do, and what

we think and do might differ from person to person. That is, our goals, competencies, values, expectations, values, emotions, and self-regulatory strategies interact with the ingredients of a situation, and these interactions can vary from one person to the next. This link between these mental units and situations, together, forms our signature personality pattern.

To be clear, both between- and within-person approaches to personality may be useful. Generally, everyone routinely acts in a wide range of ways on a given dimension of behavior (between-person trait approach). When trying to describe how a person is on average over long periods of time, traits suffice. When trying to explain and predict behavior in daily life, within-person approaches are necessary. This is because there is a near-zero correlation between how people act during one hour of the day and how they act in a different hour of the day (Fleeson, 2001). Moreover, the degree of variability in how the typical person behaves in a typical study across situations is substantially greater than how he or she differs from other people. To evaluate how large these amounts of variation are in personality, we can use a meaningful standard of comparison such as emotions experienced on a given day. Emotions are commonly believed to vary extensively such that scientists often conceive it to be a fleeting psychological state rather than a stable personality trait. Interestingly, the amount of within-person variability in how people exhibit Openness and curiosity, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Big Five personality traits represented as behaviors) is just as large as the within-person variability in positive and negative emotions (Fleeson, 2001). To understand what makes people act differently from one moment to the next, we can examine the ingredients of situations and whether there are stable combinations for a particular person.

Several researchers have adopted a within-person approach to personality, making inroads to understanding and enhancing well-being (e.g., Campbell, Simpson, Stewart, & Manning, 2003; Cervone, 1997; Heppner et al., 2008). Suppose a person expresses his or her emotions openly when spending time with friends, family, coworkers, and strangers but tends to conceal emotions and be distant in romantic situations. If these patterns are relatively stable, for all intents and purposes, the situational contingencies are part of his or her personality. To ignore or discount these contingencies is to miss opportunities to explain relevant variability in social behavior and to uncover effective targets of intervention.

Other researchers have been creative in using rich, within-person data of how people respond over time to create between-person personality measures. For instance, instead of relying on the content or frequency of emotions, researchers can evaluate the degree to which people emphasize valence (the dimension of pleasure to pain) when communicating about their felt experiences. Barrett (2006) has coined the term *valence focus* to capture this dynamic dimension of personality. Over the course of repeated measurements, people high in valence focus consistently rate words such as *anxiety*, *anger*, and *sadness* by their common property of pain (with minimal consideration of how anxiety and anger are high-energy states, whereas sadness is a low-energy state). This personality trait can only be operationalized after collecting self-reported ratings to emotion terms on multiple occasions and evaluating the emergent pattern of responses—the proportion of variance attributable to the positivity or negativity of experiences is what classifies a person as higher or lower in valence focus. Valence focus is an implicit measure as people are often unaware of how the amount of positivity or negativity of an experience drives their response pattern tendencies. Compared with people low in valence focus, people high in valence focus described themselves as being more emotionally intense, being sensitive to reward and punishment, and having greater self-esteem instability in their daily social interactions (Barrett, 2006; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2009). This program of research exemplifies that personality is about how people tend to respond to contingencies in their environment, and the measurement approach does not need to be static, lacking context sensitivity. The measurement approach should be driven by the phenomena being studied and the questions being asked, which often dictates repeated dynamic measurements (see Robinson, 2004, for another creative strategy for using within-person data to measure a theoretically meaningful personality trait).

### **Preventing a Tool-Based Discipline**

The different approaches to personality research in context sets the stage for a simple point—a methodological pluralism offers us all the greatest opportunity to discover and extend the science of personality and individual differences. Antithetical to a pluralistic approach is a science that gets driven by a single-minded or single-tool approach. When researchers restrict their focus to “safe” methods that are accepted by the research community and offer the greatest likelihood

of publication, we miss opportunities to make valuable discoveries and, perhaps unintentionally, mask methodological artifacts. Questioning our own designs, methods, measures, statistics, and reporting methods leaves us more flexible scientifically. Many, if not most, of the early discoveries in psychological science (e.g., classical and operant conditioning, power law, bystander effect, stages of cognitive development) came when there were no routine methods. In most cases, the methods might even be regarded as weak, but they were adequate to reveal the nature of human behavior and development. These examples are not meant to convince readers that methods are irrelevant; our intent is exactly the opposite. We want to emphasize that research methods and tools must serve the researcher.

Rather than letting existing tools dictate our scientific approach, our research questions should dictate the tools and methods to be used. If the tools are inadequate to address unresolved issues, then new tools require creation. If we believe that self-regulation often occurs outside of conscious awareness, then we are going to require nonobtrusive, implicit measures and not rely solely on face-valid, explicit measures. If we are interested in how generosity and kindness impact work productivity, our measurement strategy might change depending on whether we want to know if people endorsing these strengths are different from people who do not, whether people who are kind and compassionate on a particular day are more productive on the same day, or whether being kind and compassionate outside of work has spillover effects on work performance. Depending on the specific research question, the ideal measurement strategy could be global questionnaires, responses to carefully calibrated manipulations in the laboratory, online judgments or thoughts throughout the time course of a particular event, experience sampling of daily behaviors over multiple days, or observations made by coworkers and supervisors (among others; Robins, Fraley, & Kruger, 2007). Instead of selecting assessment techniques because they are new, popular, easy to implement, or cost-effective, researchers and practitioners should continually return to the territory that they hope to explore, and relentlessly seek better ways of getting there.

### **Questioning a Variable-Centric Universe**

Far too much work in the field of personality science, no different from other areas of psychology, is what we call “variable-centric.”

That is, the scientific attention gets devoted to working with singular variables in isolation. Consider a simple outcome such as physical health. A PsycInfo literature search restricted to peer-reviewed articles published over the past decade corroborated this claim, where over 2,500 articles were found with physical health as the outcome and more than 500 variables (e.g., alcohol consumption, depression, HIV) from approximately 10 different general classes of causes (e.g., health behaviors, mental health, physical health) were identified as predictors of the outcome. In most cases, a single variable was studied as the focal cause of changes in physical health. Evident from these results is the common restriction to one or a few variables of interest rather than more comprehensive examinations of people, an approach we refer to as variable-centric research. Sechrest once remarked (personal communication, July 12, 2006) that if physics had journals equivalent to psychology, there would be a journal of applied gravity. That comment speaks directly to our point about variable-centric research. Existing Big Five research is noteworthy for addressing a matrix of dimensions; however, a large number of scientists often focus on a single personality trait, such as gratitude, to conduct a programmatic line of research to understand well-being (excluding other relevant personality dimensions such as adult attachment, altruism, and mindfulness that share similar core elements—positive emotionality, attention to the ongoing situation). Gratitude, in this case, is gravity and researchers focus solely on its influence on other variables. Of course, there is an important place for this research in personality psychology, but as scientists, we should be considerate of how our research helps to approximate real people (in all their complexity) navigating their everyday environment. In terms of using science to better understand human nature, there is more to be gained by researchers' being focused on singular dimensions of personality with strong consideration of synergy or combination with other relevant dimensions of personality and at the minimum, regular tests of construct specificity (competition among personality dimensions to account for the phenomena of interest).

Variable-centric research may miss the underlying causal structure simply due to the fact that a small subset of known variables is being addressed. Besides the restricted number of variables that are studied together, there is an issue concerning the level of analysis used to get to know another person, whether a research participant or client. While spending time on emotions, self-regulatory strate-

gies, and personality traits is useful, there are other levels of analysis where a person's strivings and integrated life narratives offer a portal into the nature of a person in context across longer periods of time. Broader conceptions of personality reflecting strivings, purpose in life, and life narratives offer additional insight (beyond emotions and traits) into how and why certain people are healthy and successful in the long term (Emmons, 1999; Little, Salmela-Aro, & Phillips, 2007; McAdams, 2008; McKnight & Kashdan, 2009). We look forward to the continuing integration of multiple variables at different levels of analysis to address people in research and practice.

The bidirectional relationship between personality and social relationships is often studied without an appreciation of heterogeneity (the same goes for a large number of other topics in psychology). Complementary to variable-centric research is what we term a "person-centered" approach that focuses on different subsets of people and how they differ as a function of prespecified characteristics. This approach is quite useful when there is the potential for meaningful heterogeneity that is lost when the focus is limited to response means. For instance, in an effort to understand group membership and well-being, it is probably insufficient to simply regard people who report being religious as a homogeneous group to be compared with a supposedly homogeneous group of people who are not religious. We suspect that the reason that religiosity has a small correlation with indices of happiness and meaning in life is that groups with distinct motivations, behavioral commitment, and moral beliefs and development are being merged together. With a person-centric approach, we can empirically determine whether there are cases (or classes) of religious people who are qualitatively different from others on meaningful variables such as the degree to which they are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, the degree to which there is behavioral commitment on a daily basis toward prayer and sacrifice, and the degree to which choices regarding socializing, leisure, and work are dictated by religious beliefs. With a person-centered approach, scientists can test whether there are distinct, meaningful subsets of people whose characteristics correspond to significant differences in well-being, social attitudes, or moral behavior. As long as inquiry is not restricted to a small subset of the population of interest, relevant variables are chosen in the quest to map out potentially neglected heterogeneity, and replications are relatively consistent, person-centered approaches preserve human

beings as the unit of analysis, improving inferences that can be made about the dynamic complexity of people. On their own, neither approach offers the scope of synthesis of a broad theory. To do this, a perspective is needed that includes the majority of relevant indicators at both the predictor and outcome levels and thus combines variable-centric and person-centric approaches. To do anything less is to increase the propensity to find spurious effects, sending researchers and allied health professionals down dead ends to understanding and improving people's lives.

Our hope is that a future agenda for personality science is broad enough to include various approaches and methods, guided (but not governed) by strong—or at least sound—theory. Instead of grabbing a single body part of the proverbial elephant, science will progress faster when we realize that no personality trait exists in a vacuum. We also require links between the intrapersonal and interpersonal world. The research on how people respond when their romantic partners share good news has been a valuable addition to understanding close relationships. The degree to which someone believes their partner showed interest in positive events that happened to them (“perceived capitalization”) has been shown to be predictive of love and commitment in a relationship—even after accounting for how available partners are during difficult times (social support; Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006; Reis et al., 2010). With the establishment of this construct called “perceived capitalization,” we can now turn to the qualities of the people who enter situations where partners share positive events to understand how other personality traits, self-regulatory strategies, and contextual variables operate in this equation. Similarly, seemingly intrapersonal traits such as wisdom, creativity, and perseverance are rarely considered in the context of social interactions and relationships. The merger of the intrapersonal and interpersonal is a fruitful direction because outside of the laboratory and questions on paper-and-pencil questionnaires, people cannot be divorced from the ebb and flow of social situations (even if it is just imagining or fantasizing about other people).

The articles published in this volume represent the heterogeneity we describe above. These contributions push psychological science and, in particular, personality science into the realm of a problem-focused, methodological pluralism. Leary and Allen (this issue) review the importance of personality characteristics in determining whether, when, and how people engage in self-presentation. While

most research guided by attachment theory examines individual differences in attachment dimensions, Campbell and Marshall (this issue) synthesize existing data showing how certain contexts are particularly likely to activate attachment-related anxiety and other contexts deactivate this system. By definition, self-regulation is an intrapersonal process, but Luchies, Finkel, and Fitzsimons (this issue) explore how self-regulation strength, content, and strategies cannot be divorced from an interpersonal context—operating in the development, maintenance, and quality of close relationships. From the other direction, DeWall, Deckman, Pond, and Bonser (this issue) summarize the growing literature on how feeling excluded or accepted by other people impacts people's self-regulatory capacity and distress tolerance. With a different perspective on the human need to belong, Silvia and Kwapil (this issue) provide new insights into people showing signs of social anhedonia, who show a lack of concern about feeling accepted or valued by other people. Cooper, Barber, Zhaoyang, and Talley (this issue) share their fascinating program of research on human sexuality, giving full consideration to individuals, their partners, and the environment, which all work in tandem to capture the complexity of the real world. While most research on curiosity focuses on its relevance to achievement, Kashdan, McKnight, Fincham, and Rose (this issue) provide three studies on the relevance of curiosity to meeting new people and how different social situations alter the regulatory strategies used and the interpersonal outcomes obtained. Finally, Graber, Laurenceau, and Carver (this issue) provide an invaluable primer on innovative methodologies and statistical analyses for studying the reciprocal relationship between intrapersonal and interpersonal processes. In sum, the contributors to this issue offer insights into the exciting new directions that are possible when contextual science and personality collide.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

We are interested in how personality theory and research fit in the larger picture of science and how to make this happen to an even greater degree, what inroads still need to be made; what areas are being neglected and misunderstood, and what requires modification with the goal of advancing the quality of basic science and evidence-based applications. In this context, we would like to emphasize that criticisms and critiques should be constructive, a means to an end rather than an end in themselves.

In this special issue, we hope to deepen personality science and enhance its longevity. Leading researchers synthesized existing knowledge on the complex ways that people are intertwined with their social milieu, and weighed in on the best strategies for personality science to realize its considerable potential.

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