Personality psychology as the integrative study of traits and worldviews

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ABSTRACT

Personality psychology inevitably studies human beings not just as mechanical systems, but also as rational agents, whose experiences and actions are imbued with meaning. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the implications of taking this core element of personality psychology seriously, and to thereby contribute to the development of an integrative and normative framework for the field. I argue that personality can be studied both through trait constructs, referring to objective behavioral regularities, and through worldview constructs, referring to subjective sources of meaning, and try to show that worldviews are, contrary to popular belief, not inherently less universal, or in other ways less basic, than traits. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of more systematic study of worldviews, integration across the trait-worldview divide, and complementing the individual differences approach with personalistic methodology, for the development of richer and more unified portraits of personalities.

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Personality psychology today lacks a coherent and integrative conception of personality. This may in itself be neither surprising nor, some would say, alarming, given the institutional and theoretical fragmentation of psychology in general and the value of theoretical and methodological pluralism for capturing the complexity of human psychology (Goertzen, 2008; Yanchar & Slife, 1997). But this issue has special significance for personality psychology, which is that branch of psychology that deals specifically with the task of, as McAdams and Pals (2006) put it, providing "an integrative framework for understanding the whole person". Not only have personality theorists emphasized the primacy of unity in personality throughout the history of the field (Allport, 1937; Block, 1995; Magnusson, 1999; Mayer, 1998; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Pervin, 2001), philosophical analyses suggest that seeing unity within a human being is, in fact, essential for interpreting him/her as a *person* in the first place (Davidson, 1973, 1974b , 1982).

Trait psychologists might protest at this point, exclaiming that personality psychology already is unified, because of its widespread consensus upon the centrality of traits and its systematic and collaborative research program on the "Big Five" traits (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008) – Extraversion, Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness. The trait tradition has, through its distillation of five widely cross-culturally replicable categories out of a fragmented array of thousands of traits and its massive body of research on these trait categories, undeniable importance for personality psychology. But the attempt to convert it into a framework for all of personality psychology, which is most explicit in McCrae and Costa's (2008) Five-Factor Theory, is bound to fail, because personality aspects such as life-story narratives (McAdams, 1996, 2008), social-cognitive motivations (Higgins & Scholer, 2008; Mischel & Shoda, 2008), personal projects (Little, 1998, 2005), and more general worldview dimensions (Koltko-Rivera, 2004; Tomkins, 1963) can, I will argue, neither be reduced to the Big Five nor excluded from personality psychology. The trait approach

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thus provides a theory about a particular set of personality characteristics, coupled with a particular methodology, but by no means a framework for all of personality psychology.

Social-cognitive personality theorists might retort that a social-cognitive framework (Bandura, 1999; Higgins & Scholer, 2008; Mischel & Shoda, 2008) may be better fit to address all of personality than trait theory. They direct attention to those mental representations that actually cause *individuals* to interpret situations and act upon situations in different ways and to the concomitant "signatures" of temporally stable behavioral variability across situations, and they sometimes aspire to accommodate the Big Five by portraying these traits as mean-level behavioral tendencies aggregated across groups of individuals (Mischel & Shoda, 2008). But even if successful in this endeavor, social-cognitive theory is still far from encompassing the entire field of personality psychology, because it addresses only beliefs, attitudes, goals, and so on, predominantly about the self and the social world, with fairly direct causal links to specific behavioral patterns in social situations, and leaves out other aspects of the person's worldview that imbue experiences and actions with *meaning*.

McAdams (1992, 1995) and McAdams & Pals (2006) have instead proposed a three-level conceptualization of personality, with the first level covering the decontextualized and largely non-conditional "dispositional signature" studied within trait psychology, the second level covering socio-cognitive constructs and other motivational, cognitive, and developmental adaptations that are contextualized in time, place, and/or social role and anchored in the particularities and dynamics of everyday life, and the third layer consisting of life-story narratives, which are developed over time, internalizing narrative forms and contents from culture, in order to find unity, meaning, and purpose in life and form a personal identity. McAdams and colleagues (McAdams & Manczak, 2011; McAdams & Olson, 2010) have recently proposed that these three levels form developmental layers, progressing from infancy, when broad differences in social action emerge (layer 1), to childhood, when an agentic goal-pursuing self is formed (layer 2), to adolescence and young adulthood, when narrative identity starts forming (layer 3). This model clearly does take meaning-making into account, thus providing a richer understanding of personality psychology than that afforded by previous frameworks. But there are still, I will argue, important aspects of meaning-making, such as general assumptions about human nature, the social world, and reality (Koltko-Rivera, 2004; Schwartz, 1992; Tomkins, 1963; Wong, 2012), that do not fit neatly into any of the three layers, and the assumption that dispositional traits are inherently more universal than all personal meanings is problematic. What McAdams offers is in essence an attempt to make sense of "the best research and theory in personality psychology today" (McAdams & Pals, 2006) rather than a comprehensive and normative framework for the entire field.

These three personality frameworks all have their individual uses and problems. But the deeper problem with all of them is that they risk elevating *current* ways of doing personality research into a paradigmatic framework for the entire field. This is a problem because it fosters reification, justification, and perpetuation of the current structure of the field rather than critical and creative thinking about the logical possibilities for studying personality, many of which are yet unrealized due to historical contingency; personality becomes what personality psychologists have traditionally studied, rather than what they *should* study – metaphysics is made out of method (Burtt, 1954; Rychlak, 1988) – and unity is bought only at the expense of comprehensiveness.

My ambition here is therefore to contribute to the construction of an integrative framework that organizes research on personality in a primarily logical and normative, rather than descriptive, way. I hope to thereby stimulate creativity and critical thinking in the future study of personality, helping us to enrich the study of personality and to transcend artificial boundaries between different constructs and methods that limit the field today, which ultimately, I hope, can help us to paint richer and more multifaceted portraits of personalities. Because my focus is on developing a framework for guiding the empirical study of personality, I will ignore the classical "grand theories" as well as more recent proposals along those lines (e.g. Mayer, 1998), which focus more on general paradigmatic assumptions about human nature than on pointing out directions for the empirical study of personality.

My analysis will start from the assumption that a key defining feature of personality psychology is that it, at least after the demise of radical logical behaviorism, relies implicitly or explicitly upon the *intentional level of description* and not just upon the *mechanistic level of description* – that is, we say that persons have beliefs, goals, values, desires, and so on, that imbue their experiences with intentionality and meaning and their actions with purpose and rationality, rather than merely being subject to the same chains of cause and effect as all other physical objects and biological mechanisms in nature (Davidson, 1963, 1974b; Hacker, 2007; Harré, Clarke, & DeCarlo, 1985; Rychlak, 1968, 1988; Searle, 1983; Stern, 1938). Not only does personality psychology today rely heavily upon the intentional level of description, it is in fact questionable whether anything can even be called a person at all, and thus be ascribed a personality, without being attributed some degree of rationality and intentionality (Davidson, 1973, 1974b; Hacker, 2007). Yet, this crucial distinction between mechanistic and intentional levels of description is, despite its paramount role in the philosophy of social science, scarcely addressed in the theoretical literature on personality and not widely understood within the field.

What I will do here is, therefore, to try to clarify the implications of taking the intentional level of description seriously for the study of personality. First, I will argue that personality psychology should incorporate both the study of traits, defined as objective behavioral regularities, and the study of the worldview aspects, defined as subjective sources of meaning, as mutually irreducible and equally basic parts. Second, I will question the ideas that traits are more inherently universal and ontogenetically basic than worldviews, arguing that we should think of the distinction between universalistic approaches, which try to strip away historic-cultural context for purposes of generalization, and