

Towards a Dynamic Approach to the Individual Differences—“Though This Be Madness, Yet There Is Method in It”

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The paper aims at introducing a new approach to individual differences. Personality is recognized here as the system built on tensions between three levels, namely traits, characteristic adaptations, and self-concept as well as tensions between the person and environment; another source of tensions is cognitive versus emotional processes. Personality development is possible during life span on the levels of characteristic adaptations and self-concepts, however, minor changes are possible also on the level of traits. Adaptation and transgression are two opposite kinds of processes, the former stands for integration and emotional security, and the latter for innovation and change.

Keywords: individual differences, personality, integration, change, adaptation

Introduction

How it can be explained that sometimes people behave in a way one would not expect them to do? Or, why the person who is known for us and whose personality we assume to know is able to surprise us? In this article, we propose some possible answers to such questions. As a theoretical framework, we propose the model of controlled inconsistency of personality, which constitutes a dynamic approach to individual differences. This model is based on system approach to study of functioning and development. We start from the assumption that personality functioning is based on the discrepancies among the traits, characteristic adaptations, and the self-system. Later, the personality will be presented as a system operating on the tensions between different spheres. Then we will characterize two sets of processes taking place in the personality: adaptive and transgressive. At the end of this article, five general strivings are mentioned and we explain the reasons of individual differences regarding as dynamic features of the personality system.

Three Levels of Personality—The Integration or the Chaos?

Personality consists of three levels: basic tendencies (traits), characteristic adaptations, and self-concepts (McAdams & Pals, 2006; McCrae & Costa, 2010). Different factors influence personality on each level. At the level of traits—genes, biological processes, physical and social environment, and also habits are especially relevant. On the level of characteristic adaptations, the personality is influenced by: habits, social environment, and personal intentions. Significant others and culture on the one hand and meaning giving processes,

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self-narratives on the other hand affect personality on the level of self-concept. Personality is defined as the complex organization of cognitions, effects, and behaviors that gives direction and pattern (coherence) to the person's life (Pervin, 1996, p. 414).

In this broadly accepted and well grounded tradition of understanding, personality, the integration function of personality is emphasized, which becomes apparent in the case of mental disintegration as a symptom of the disorder of mental health (Funder, 2010; Larsen & Buss, 2005; Mischel, Shoda, & Ayduk, 2008). Meanwhile, personality development requires some tensions and the states similar to disintegration, otherwise the changes are not possible (as cited in Allport, 1961; Heckhausen, 2001; Mayer, 2007; Trempała, 2000). Therefore, we propose a model of controlled inconsistencies of personality what emphasizes the unique property which determines functioning of the psyche thanks to the existence of internal tensions and disagreements between the individual and the environment.

Discrepancies—Voltage—Energy

Personality functions due to incoherencies among the traits, characteristic adaptations and the self-system, and to deficits of person-environment fit. That is why it can be said that personality is a system of tensions. What kind of tensions? There are tensions arising from, for example: (1) inconsistency between beliefs, feelings, and behavior; (2) possible gap between the needs, aspirations, strivings and goals, and their realization; (3) the contrast or the distance between a personal potential and its fulfillment. While the degree of match and mismatch to the environment is expressed in terms of, for example, (1) the expected or desired behaviors that are irrelevant to the underlying trend (features); (2) personal beliefs, different from the beliefs of other people or non-compliant with the standards prevailing in the environment; or (3) agentic activity not suited to opportunities offered by the environment and yet feasible to achieve. Personal activity which does not fit to the trait for a long run is energy consuming or even stressful. Thus we can postulate that permanent or long-lasting discrepancies between the traits and the characteristic adaptation (i.e., between structure and function of personality) increase the risk of burn-out syndrome (Fischer & Boer, 2011; Shinn, Rosario, Mørch, & Chestnut, 1984).

The functions of personality are responsible for dynamic control over inconsistencies in personality system as well as inconsistencies between the person and environment. There are three general functions of personality. First, personality modulates the incoherencies between thoughts, feelings, and actions. This feature is similar to ego-resiliency (Block, 2008). Second, personality modulates inconsistencies between traits, characteristic adaptations, and the self. This function is emphasized by Larson and Buss (2005), when they postulated an adaptation to intra-psyche variety. Third, personality establishes a relative balance between the requirements of social environment and personal intentions. This property is well described by Obuchowski (2009) as a creative adaptation, but also stressed, for example by Allport (1961), Bandura (2006), and Koziellecki (2007).

Therefore, it can be distinguished two types of adaptation and development processes. On the one hand, people are motivated by adaptation processes. What does it mean? Adaptation or to adapt means to tend to the optimal fit between individual predispositions (traits, beliefs, and personal myths) and the requirements and/or challenges of the environment. In general, these processes are responsible for the stability and inner integration of personality. On the other hand, people are motivated by transgressive processes, which are more specific especially for developing personality. Transgression—What does it mean? Transgression, or to overcome a

given state or pattern of functioning means, in the most cases, to increase a gap between personal predispositions and the environment, as well as between the desired and the actual state. In general, these processes are responsible for the change and the ability to develop or to become mature (Oleś, 2011; Riediger & Freund, 2008; Carver, 2005).

Both trends, both kinds of the processes are in a dynamic balance dependent on the personal attributes (e.g., need for stimulation) and motivational factors (aims and desires), as well as the opportunities that exist in the environment and are recognized by the person. Certainly, one can notice the phenomenon of asymmetry between the two processes, what is associated with critical periods in human development and the periods of relative stabilization of life structure or life paradigm. Simultaneously, these two trends or kinds of processes are mutually related. What is the specific for such a relationship? We postulate feedback between adaptation and transgression. In addition, there are of course variations in the intensity of individual adaptation and transgressive trends. This may be a consequence of the development, especially in adolescence, which relies more heavily on self-adapting or agency. What is more, historical and socio-cultural factors modify the severity of the both trends, according to the events and pressures posed. Lastly, there are also predispositions understood as neurophysiological processes (constituting temperament, sensual perception, and cognitive abilities), which give the basic tone of functioning, and manifest themselves in the form of so-called basic tendencies (traits and intelligence). While the temperament sets the general framework of human functioning, motivation turns to the relationship between the person and the environment. The general principle of operation of personality, which controls voltage mismatch and modulation, is carried out in the two dimensions of the personality, which are: (1) integration versus tension underlying transgressive activity; and (2) continuity versus change. Personality is a system which is responsible not only for the current, past and future behavior, feelings, and beliefs, but also evaluation of the events, giving meanings, interpretation, and integration experience (especially in the temporal and axiological dimensions), construction of the history of life, creation and change of identity, giving meaning to life (Bandura, 2006; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; McAdams & Olson, 2010).

What Are the Individual Differences?

It can be distinguished five meta-motives characteristic for the person: (1) contact and unity; (2) happiness and well-being; (3) fulfillment of inner potential; (4) excellence in selected form of activity; and (5) meaning and purpose in life. All of them can produce tensions and discrepancies in interaction with the environment. The individual differences, besides levels of particular variables like intensity of a given meta-motive or such variables as extraversion or achievement motivation, stand for dynamic processes:

- (1) Optimal personal level of each type of the discrepancies and tensions (e.g., a level necessary for personal development or effective coping and personal strivings);
- (2) Optimal personal level of coherence and incoherence of behavior across time and/or situations (e.g., a level optimal for adjustment and innovation);
- (3) Optimal personal composition of the strivings, including a dynamic balance among them and an individual pattern of changes (one aspect is variety of strivings realized at a given time period, another one refers to continuity versus shifts and rapid changes);
- (4) Dynamic balance of frequency of intentional and conventional behaviors (the former reinforce identity and the latter reinforce adaptation);

(5) Personal endurance for permanent discrepancy or tension of a particular kind, for instance between basic dispositions and characteristic adaptations (e.g., habits at work opposed to natural predispositions, like traits);

(6) Personal organization of inner tensions (e.g., inspiring for personal development or goal realization);

(7) Optimal personal discrepancies between the person and environment (e.g., implied by preferred level of stimulation and/or kind of life tasks);

(8) Optimal personal relation between internal tensions and external discrepancies (e.g., individual ratio between intra- and inter-personal conflicts).

In each case when we refer to “optimal level”, we assume optimal range for given kind of activity, exposition to stress, or stage of personal maturity. Such understanding of individual differences emphasize not a stable level of one or more variables, but a state of a dynamic equilibrium in spectrum characteristic for a given person (or group when we are looking for generalizations). Moreover, such individual differences allow us to describe and to explain the processes specific for personality integration, change, and continuity. Last, but not least, the proposed understanding of individual differences implies renewed approach to the assessment of individual differences and thus construction of new methods.

This approach has one serious limit: One should measure several dynamic variables in one (or more) investigation instead of one (or more) relatively stable variables. However, it allows for more complex research in personality. Following this way of thinking on personality we can discover the individual differences in personality functioning across time and situations.

Conclusions

Adaptation-innovation paradigm is more sufficient than homeostatic paradigm. What is necessary for effective functioning and personality development: internal tensions or external discrepancies. Due to dynamic control over the discrepancies and modulation of the tensions, there are the general rules of personality functioning. Integration vs. innovation, and continuity vs. change constitute two main dimensions of personality functioning. The model of controlled inconsistency of personality, in which personality is recognized as a kind of system operating on power from voltage, can be compared to the phenomenon known in physics as the “contact potential difference”, involving the production of tension and energy as a result of contact between two metals. Similarly, we can look at the development of the personality—like the constant abrasion of the various factors. And again, as in relativistic physics it all depends on the reference point, differences and tensions in personality can be treated as a source of frustration and disorder, or as a phenomenon of giving energy to the development.

In contrast to typical paradigm of individual differences, this approach goes beyond description towards prediction of human functioning. As Revelle, Wilt, and Condon (2011) argued, “The field may thus benefit from shifting its focus from correlational structure to prediction” (p. 26). While traditional approach is based on comparison of the variables, in this text, we propose mode dynamic approach focused on a set of variables which simultaneously characterize changing discrepancies in personality system.

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