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### What is beyond general personality? Some clinical reflections on contextualized traits, goals and narratives

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And the rate for goals articulated upon request from a stranger in a lab setting has got to be much lower.

Or does it? This brings me to life narratives. James Pennebaker has built a fine research career around the observation that writing in some detail about our feelings during stressful experiences appears to help us weather them better, in general, for many. Those always-lurking ‘Doubting Thomases’ have noted that, in doing this, some people get stuck in ruminating about their situations and instead become depressed or ill from all that writing about how awful their worlds are. And just as people often abandon even goals they initiate themselves, they often use life narratives to shield their egos or avoid responsibility for circumstances they do not like. The failed job candidate tells himself that, as usual, the employer was biased against his race; the socially rejected narcissist rationalizes that others do not like to be overshadowed by her charm and brilliance; the alcoholic pours another glass of rotgut because his mother always told him he did not measure up, so that is why things never work out for him the way they do for others. But exceptions often do more to ‘prove’ rules than refute them. The whole idea of much psychotherapy is built around the underlying principle that Pennebaker observes playing out in his data: thinking

clearly about our lives and how we got to where we are now, that is, articulating a life narrative, tends to be psychologically enriching, healing and helpful in identifying how we can make our futures better: not always, but often enough to show up positive in lots of sample averages.

So my question here is what is happening in these studies of what people say when we ask them to articulate goals and life narratives? Are we learning something, anything, about how they actually live their lives and express their personalities, how their psychology ‘works’? If someone tells us she intends to learn to cook or to work more collegially with co-workers she does not like, is this something she is actually actively pursuing these days and will see through to fruition or something that just occurred to her now that might be nice? Will she forget about it as soon as she leaves our lab, or has the very experience of this particular idea popping into her head when asked to articulate goals planted seeds that will bear fruit in enrollment in chef’s school followed by a major career change (leaving the disliked co-workers behind) 4 years later? If we ask people to write, do they discover the experience of its ‘cleansing’ or ‘clarifying’ properties themselves and take up journaling, or do they find yet another reason to have a double scoop of ice cream that is not on their diets on the way home?

## What is Beyond General Personality? Some Clinical Reflections on Contextualized Traits, Goals and Narratives

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*Abstract: Dunlop provides an integrative framework for the study of personality as it is lived by the individual and covers much ground in pulling together McAdams’ thinking about essential distinctive levels of personality and research from the contextualized personality literature. While we welcome Dunlop’s reminder about the importance of recognizing the dynamic relatedness of distinguishable levels of personality, we question whether the presented operationalizations of contextualized personality are optimal. Our comment departs from a clinical angle, and we illustrate these thoughts using examples from Therapeutic Assessment. Copyright © 2015 European Association of Personality Psychology*

Dunlop’s article (2015) reminds us that meaningful personality dynamics occur at three distinctive levels (roughly captured by the self as *agent*, *actor* and *author*), and that each level may be optimal for different (research) questions. This reminder stimulated thought on how this interplay emerges in clinical situations. We offer an example from our clinical work in Therapeutic Assessment (TA). In TA, a semi-structured method of clinical assessment explicitly aiming for therapeutic benefit (Finn & Tonsager, 1997; Finn, 2007), patients are (self-) referred for psychological testing when certain aspects of their personal life stories (cf. generalized or contextualized narratives) are poorly understood, no longer adaptive to reality and/or cause suffering. The first step in this procedure is that patient and assessor identify and formulate questions that the assessment should elucidate; most often, these questions concern aspects of self that do not make sense to the patient. Patients may ask: *Why can I not just be content with myself?* Or: *Why is it that other people see me as self-confident, although privately I feel*

*very insecure?* Drawing on input from instruments belonging to the trait/adjustment domain (e.g. Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory Revised (MMPI-2)), the motivational domain (e.g. Thematic Apperception Test, Rorschach) and experiential techniques, patients co-construct new narratives with the assessor that better fit their current situations, and they may (or may not) revise their goals in the process. Whether these changes also amount to dynamics in trait standings depends, we believe, on one’s conception of traits; if considered merely descriptively, as density distributions of states, they may.

Furthermore, a crucial element of the process in TA, and probably of most therapies aimed at personality change (e.g. Schema-Focused Therapy; Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003), concerns the interplay between narrated and non-narrated aspects of living and of personality. Dunlop draws attention to the distinction between narrated stories on one hand and a person’s life story ‘inside’ on the other, but he remains rather vague on the relation between the two. It might be read as a simple

latent-observed relation, where the latent narratives cause the observed stories. However, such an interpretation (which is not necessarily Dunlop's view) is in our view problematic. In our experience, the narrative *produced* in Therapeutic Assessment *emerges* from the interplay between tests, assessor and client, as opposed to a latent narrative that is being *uncovered*. The co-constructed narrative contains many elements that did not exist in narrative form or even in verbal form before the TA process.

We concur with Dunlop that personality may present itself as a collection of more or less integrated parts and therefore recognize that there may be important aspects of personality hierarchically 'below' the generalized level. Clinical experience certainly supports the existence of dramatic and 'stable discrepancies' in reaction patterns in patients, for example, dramatic identity shifts in Borderline Personality Disorder or major, instant shifts in self-esteem in Narcissistic Personality Disorder. However, the contextualized study of personality as presented tends to be conducted in terms of psychosocial roles, such as professional, intimate partner and so on. A central notion of the target article is that a person holds different contextualized self-representations for these contexts, at each level. Unfortunately, 'role' may be a rather crude basis for distinguishing relevant personality contexts. An interesting alternative, which in our view is compatible with the presented evidence, would be to conceptualize seemingly discrepant aspects of personality in terms of 'modi', a concept originating from Schema-Focused Therapy (Young et al., 2003). Modi are combinations of various self-schemata and their associated coping mechanisms, *triggered by specific environmental stimuli*. These probably do not closely correspond to 'roles'. More than likely, a person may experience different modi within one role (e.g. triggered by perceived rejection or authority), and several roles will trigger the same set of modi. The advantage of schema theory is that it provides a psychological basis, rooted in the frustration of basic emotional needs, for classification of relevant contexts.

Another concern relates to the nature of what is considered evidence for contextualized self-representations. While we recognize that goals and personal narratives differ systematically

across interpersonal and professional contexts, we believe this observation may well point to the powerful influence of context itself, as opposed to the (potency of) situation-dependent aspects of *personality*. A now classic study conducted by Mischel and others (Mischel & Shoda, 1995) can illustrate this point further. In this study, children were rated on several trait-like behaviours while in different situations. The children turned out to differ in the degree to which a certain behaviour was observed in different situations. However, the patterns themselves were consistent. For example, some children consistently showed a pattern conforming to 'if praised by adults, then he acted aggressively', but 'if approached by peers he acted friendly'. Other children showed different patterns. Mischel interpreted these results to mean that the salient subjective cognitive and affective aspects of the situation predicted the behaviour, and not the situation per se. Constricting oneself to 'roles' would obscure these individual differences. Moreover, it seems quite obvious that, on average, people would have more agentic strivings in professional contexts and more communal strivings in personal contexts (as showed by Dunlop, Walker & Wiens, 2013). Again, this seems to be more an indication of the strength of the situations rather than anything else, let alone personality. Mischel's proposition of stable (trait-like) if, then profiles seems to us a more conceptually appealing explanation for variability in behaviours over contexts. In sum, while we recognize the empirical importance of contextual variation, we remain unconvinced regarding the conceptual importance of 'contextualized personality' as presented by Dunlop.

Dunlop presents numerous directions for future research. Indeed, several of these creative ideas may be of potential interest, but overall we feel that the current evidence base does not yet make too persuasive a case for quick expansion into new territory. We hold that further sharpening of concepts and operationalizations (e.g. pertaining to the production of contextual self-representational narratives, the basis for contextualization and the definition of what is considered personality-related 'outcome') may be a prerequisite.

## Personality Beyond Traits: Narrow-Sense and Broad-Sense Personality Definitions

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*Abstract: Dunlop tries to integrate the contextualized self-concept perspective and the three-layer model of personality. I strongly support attempts of integration of apparently compatible or even incompatible approaches to bring forward the field of personality research. However, I identified conceptual shortcomings that may be resolved with a clear, common and broad-sense definition of personality. Moreover, Dunlop's integration attempt does not go far enough in specific aspects relevant to the possible marriage of the two approaches. Given these shortcomings, I cannot see a marriage at the moment but rather a first date. Copyright © 2015 European Association of Personality Psychology*

Dunlop (2015) provides a comprehensive and sophisticated overview of two perspectives on the architecture and dynamics of personality and attempts to integrate them: contextualized approaches to personality and the three-level model of personality (McAdams, 2015). These approaches

share many aspects relevant to personality and may be well compatible. However, the article has decisive shortcomings I will address in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, a marriage without love often results in unhappiness and often does not continue. Dunlop's article lacks a common