



Personality science: exploring boldly, integrating creatively

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The study of personality is burgeoning. Within psychology, researchers are exploring a remarkable range of topics, using analytic units that extend from polypeptides to personal projects to the political contexts of daily lives. Personality psychologists have been joined by researchers in fields as diverse as molecular genetics, evolutionary biology, behavioral economics, and cultural theory to create a transdisciplinary personality science. Considered as a collective intellectual venture, the research agendas advanced by personality scientists have three overarching concerns: exploring the nature of human nature, the sources of variability in thought, feeling and action, and the roots of human individuality. These are audacious aspirations and *Frontiers in Personality Science and Individual Differences* is committed to stimulating and facilitating their pursuit.

Exploring the frontiers of personality science poses major challenges. Perhaps the most central of these is the enduring task of personality psychology of providing the integrative center for psychology (Little, 1972, 2005; Revelle, 2008). Within the human sciences, psychology, too, has a key integrative function (Cleeremans, 2010). If psychology is a hub science then personality psychology has been a hub within a hub, the central nexus through which the diverse processes of human behavior come into common focus. An even more expansive and demanding task now presents itself for personality science – to explore boldly and integrate creatively in theory, methods, applications, and institution building.

Theoretical perspectives in personality science facilitate both our exploratory and integrative aspirations. Conceptual frameworks for exploration are likely to be tight, focused, and guided by the shared assumptions and aspirations of the different research guilds that have made personality science their intellectual home. It is entirely likely, perhaps necessary,

that members of one guild will not be on speaking terms with those of another. But the integrative aspirations of personality science will require theories that explicitly seek to bridge the isolated islands of research and this will require an ecumenical attitude toward colleagues of diverse faiths. We now have several metatheoretical frameworks for personality science that will remain an important force for synoptic thinking and integration (e.g., McAdams, 1996; Sheldon, 2004).

Like theories, the methods of personality science also face the challenge of facilitating bold exploration while providing possibilities for integration. Some methodologies have been created with just such possibilities in mind. Personal Projects Analysis (Little, 1983) for example, was explicitly developed to explore the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of action in context as well as providing information on the physical, social, and political contexts through which the doings of daily life are pursued. Such methods, based on measurement assumptions that differ radically from those undergirding traditional methods, allow us to test alternative theoretical models, grounded in specialist inquiry. But they also render those inquiries commensurable and therefore capable of integration.

Although personality psychology has had important applied implications since its inception it has seldom seen itself as an applied field. That seems to be changing and the shift will be even more apparent in an expanded personality science. Much of the recent intellectual excitement in the study of personality arises from applied psychologists in organizational, clinical, and counseling psychology, among others, who are discovering that the insights of personality research can be pivotal for enhancing the effectiveness of their applied activities. Trait psychology provides increasingly sophisticated guidelines for matching individual dispositions to treatment regimens. The study of personal action, goals, tasks, and

projects creates a powerful framework, perhaps the most effective one we have, for enhancing the quality of lives (Sheldon and Lyubomirsky, 2006). Narrative perspectives in personality research are similarly informing and enhancing clinical practice.

Finally, a major challenge for personality science, implicit in the above, is the need for institution building. Organizations such as the Association for Research in Personality and the European Association of Personality Psychology have been incubators for a broadly based personality science and their memberships are likely to continue to expand rapidly. Importantly, the *Frontiers* community promises to be a major contributor to both exploration and integration in our field. It encourages and rewards audacious, focused, exploratory research – no holds barred. But it also pursues the grander project of breaking down barriers of providing access to and building bridges across the different domains of science.

The prospects for a flourishing personality science are extremely promising. The very breadth of its scope together with its integrative mission means that there may be the odd internecine squabble and some gnashing of teeth as we expand our frontiers and make sense of what we find. And there is no doubt that some of our challenges involve the most basic and profound questions we can ask about psychological science, such as the limits of reductionism in a world of emergent selves and contextual contingencies. But it is out of such contrasting modes of doing science that truly creative insights are likely to emerge. The timing could not be more propitious for the study of personality. Advance boldly, integrate creativity, and stir as needed!

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