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Personality Systems and Personal Consistency

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The personality system is sufficiently complex that its organization cannot be apprehended at one time. Rather, theorists develop complementary perspectives on personality that each elucidate a few of its central organizing principles (Bertalanffy, 1975a, p. 122; 1975c, pp. 113–114). Personality has typically been considered from one of four perspectives: (a) as an open system that exchanges information with the environment, (b) as distributed across different psychological subsystems that process information in partial independence of one another, (c) as organized in a hierarchical pattern controlled by a conscious executive, and (d) as developing to meet a particular goal. Caspi and Moffitt have limited their view of personality consistency to the first and last of these perspectives—which restricts the generalizability of their work. This narrowed perspective is a fault the target article shares in common with much of the personality consistency literature. A truly different perspective on individual consistency

and change emerges from employing several different perspectives.

Personality Organization as an Open System

From the open-systems perspective, personality exchanges materials or information with the environment (Bertalanffy, 1975b, pp. 40–43). Examining personality consistency in relation to the environment makes sense because personality is exquisitely sensitive to external factors. For example, the transmission of gossip can cause a person euphoria or despair. Caspi and Moffitt begin their article by providing evidence that both threatening and ambiguous situations elicit consistent individual differences in behaviors. Individual differences are elicited in threatening situations because emotional people act as everyone else does until threat triggers their self-protective reactions. Individual

differences are enhanced in ambiguous situations because a person in such a situation is free to create a response from his or her unique abilities, dispositions, and motivations. Caspi and Moffitt rightly point out that many situations combine both threatening and ambiguous aspects that might additively promote individualized behavior at critical life junctures. But Caspi and Moffitt's overemphasis on situational determinants leads to an incomplete picture of personality consistency.

Personality Organization as Distributed Across Psychological Subsystems

Personality organization is also distributed over many psychological subsystems. For example, an introvert might possess both the desire to be outgoing and encouraging friends but also might be prevented from socializing by a neurological subsystem that is easily overstimulated (Eysenck, 1990). Moreover, certain cognitive subsystems are often consistent to the point of invariance. A person asked to recall his name will reliably produce it almost without regard to environment or conscious intention; similarly, critical life-events will be consistently recalled and will exert consistent influences on perception. The emotion system appears stable as well; its state might change, but its overall mood-level and cyclicity will be consistent. Thus, an emotionally labile mood system will consistently change from happy to sad and back again, whereas a stable system will not so change. Subsidiary organization among these systems might also be stable. As emotions change from pleasant to unpleasant and back again, a broad spectrum of judgments will shift congruently along with them (e.g., sunny weather will seem more likely during happy moods). This interaction occurs absent any environmental cues or conscious intention (Mayer, Gaschke, Braverman, & Evans, 1993; cf. Kihlstrom, 1990). Caspi and Moffitt don't approach this type of consistency because they never adopt this perspective. But, consistency in a distributed system is likely to be present in many instances—and not necessarily easily detected in behavior.

Personality Organization as a Hierarchy

From a third perspective, personality is organized hierarchically, with a mostly unchanging executive exerting control over the personality subsystems. This executive, often identified as consciousness, serves as a consistent companion. We might alternate between awareness and automatized behavior, lose conscious-

ness every night, or feel our stream of consciousness momentarily expand oceanically. Aside from instances of extreme mental illness, however, we never mistake our consciousness for another's. From this hierarchical perspective, there can be no question that an individual's conscious awareness is constant from birth to death. Moreover, conscious self-control is one of the few means we have of improving our selves and our lives. Only by making "conscious what is unconscious" (Freud, 1917/1966, p. 435) can an individual (allied both with his or her healthier self and/or with the teacher/therapist) creatively examine, analyze, and solve personal problems.

Personality Organization as a Developing System

The final perspective on the personality system is that it develops toward a goal. Caspi and Moffitt begin their article by describing how threatening, ambiguous situations elicit consistent individual differences; they conclude by describing situations that bring about personality change. By continuing to focus on environmental determinants throughout the article, they as theorists conclude with a cartoonlike, unabashedly authoritarian picture of change in which situations "knife off previous options and simultaneously impose new scripts." Change situations include Jacobs and Nadel's (1985) "... Marine bootcamp, police training, hell week in fraternities, Moonie indoctrination," and so forth. From this extreme environmental (open-system) perspective, the individual appears to be an automaton. Caspi and Moffitt are correct that certain individuals do rarely think for themselves and instead choose to identify with roles provided by career, ethnicity, nationality, and so on. But this is not the whole truth. What is missing from this and similar views on personality consistency is that distributed and hierarchical processes exert influence and control over the person as well.

My concern is that focusing too much on the open-system/behavioral-consistency approach will cause us to miss the independent, self-governing aspect of the person—which is likely critical to the continuance of both the individual and society. A person's peak of development might involve "a strong enough sense of self, based on personally selected goals, that no external disappointment can entirely undermine who he or she is" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 203). An individual who is consciously in charge has discovered the responsibility and joy of being partially independent of destructive situations and is able to build a more constructive future for himself or herself and for society. Viewing people from these alternative perspectives ensures that we don't lose sight of the obvious possibil-

ity that, in almost any situation, people do possess stable identities and can participate in their own growth.

Note

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Accentuating Methodologies: When to Find the Personality Differences That Already Exist

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In the provocative title of their target article, Caspi and Moffitt suggest that they will accomplish two related goals. First, they aim to determine when indeed “individual differences matter.” Second, they promise to offer “a paradoxical theory of personality coherence.” The gist of my commentary is that they have succeeded in only one of these two implicit aims. Caspi and Moffitt have made a convincing case that individual differences in personality matter a great deal during periods of transition, ambiguity, and uncertainty in people’s lives. They provide useful guidelines for researchers designing studies to find maximal differences in personality dispositions. As helpful as these methodological suggestions are, however, they do not translate into a theory of personality coherence, paradoxical or otherwise. The implications of Caspi and Moffitt’s approach are primarily procedural and strategic. They mainly concern methodology in the study of persons rather than personality theory per se.

The starting point in Caspi and Moffitt’s argument is the proposition that personality is essentially conservative. The basic features that distinguish persons from each other—typically understood as personality traits—tend to be conserved by the persons who “have” them. Traits specify recurrent patterns of familiar behavior and experience. As recurrence breeds familiarity and familiarity breeds yet more recurrence, persons

move through life in a mode that seems to rely more on assimilation than accommodation. With respect to personality organization, major change is thus relatively rare, even during those transition periods in life that seem to call for massive accommodation. Caspi and Moffitt make this point in a very convincing way as they draw widely on the literatures of learning theory, ethology, cognitive economics, conflict and stress, and experimental personality and social psychology. Indeed, the major lesson one should draw from the seminal work of Allport, Bruner, and Jandorf (1941) on personality under social catastrophe is that even the most momentous events in one’s social environment might not precipitate significant personality change.

Next, Caspi and Moffitt move to a position they describe as “paradoxical.” There are certain kinds of situations, they suggest, that might be expected to produce important change in personality organization—situations that seem to call on a break from one’s characteristic modes of responding and, therefore, appear likely to produce discontinuity in personality. Such situations are characterized by novelty, ambiguity, and uncertainty. By way of analogy, certain periods in one’s life may be characterized in this way as well, as transition periods wherein the person faces new and ambiguous challenges and finds that responses to these challenges are not clearly defined.

