

## How Not to Whip a Straw Dog

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One important recent finding from the social-psychological literature on stereotype formation has been called the *out-group homogeneity effect* (e.g., Park, Judd, & Ryan, 1991; Park & Rothbart, 1982). Briefly, persons tend to see their own groups as diverse and heterogeneous, whereas they see other groups as more monolithic and homogeneous. Pervin's descriptions of "trait theorists" remind me of this powerful effect. To Pervin, all trait theorists look alike.

Indeed, having never been referred to in this way before, it dawned on me that many of my fellow co-conspirators may also be finding themselves labeled *trait theorists* for the first time. I don't know how others think of themselves, but I do know that I am not, nor have I ever been, a trait theorist. (Actually, any classification system that locates Lewis Goldberg, David Funder, and Arnold Buss in the same category—other than smart-ass extraverts—is absurd.)

In thinking about Pervin's categorization of myself and others, it hit me that the phrase *trait theory* is used by some authors of textbooks on theories of personality as a rubric for grouping investigators who do not fit into any of the classic "schools" of personality, such as psychoanalysis. What Pervin has done is to reify a fictive classification of convenience. Moreover, once having constructed this putative category of investigators, Pervin then proceeds to contrast them pejoratively with an undefined and somewhat inchoate collection of others.

Remarkably, Pervin's descriptions of members of his in-group and his out-group sound virtually identical to those used by opponents of actuarial predictions some 40 years ago. In his classic monograph, *Clinical Versus Statistical Prediction*, Meehl (1954) listed "for cathartic purposes" (p. 5) the adjectives used by both proponents and opponents to refer to these types of predictions. For example, opponents of actuarial predictions referred to them using the same terms that Pervin now uses to castigate trait theorists (e.g., *static*), in contrast to the way that they described clinical predictions and to the way that Pervin describes those who are not trait theorists (e.g., *dynamic, patterned, organized*).

In his introductory section, Pervin berates the exuberant expansionism of some investigators, but that is a common human frailty, shared by scientists of all stripes and workers in all fields. Most of us tend to overvalue the importance of the problems on which we work and to overvalue our own efforts to solve them; that failing is hardly unique to trait theorists. In the

quotations cited by Pervin, Buss and Brody equate the field of personality with the study of individual differences, which is no big crime, albeit not a universal definition of the field. Digman, McCrae and Costa, McCrae and John, and Widiger all use some phrase like *personality structure* to refer to the more circumscribed "model of phenotypic personality traits," but one can understand the reason for this choice when one realizes how awkward it would be to refer to everything in its most precise and pedantic form every time one refers to it. And Goldberg, who is pleased to be put in such illustrious company, feels out of place there, given that his quotation refers specifically to disagreements among current investigators.

In the same section, Pervin asserts that the NEO Personality Inventory has been claimed to be the standard "against which the *validity* [italics added] of other comprehensive personality questionnaires can be assessed." Not so. I recall no such claim, and Pervin does not reference one. Rather, the correct term in this context is *breadth* or *comprehensiveness*. (But, of course, to use the correct term destroys the impact of his argument.) Pervin cites uncritically the brief comment by Waller and Ben-Porath (1987), whose arguments were not accurate when the comment was published 6 years ago, much less today given all that has been published on the topic in the interim (e.g., Goldberg, 1990, 1992; Peabody & Goldberg, 1989).

Pervin's "Agreement Among Measures" section seems more argumentative than informative. I have used the phrase *emerging consensus* in some of my writings, which implies that even a consensus is not yet here, much less complete unanimity. Of course, there are those who disagree with any scientific model; indeed, in the absence of such skepticism, there would be no scientific progress.

In his "Fundamental Lexical Hypothesis" section, Pervin raises two questions but answers neither. "How much support is there for the hypothesis?" cannot be answered in the absence of some alternative procedure for specifying traits systematically and comprehensively. Pervin provides no clues about his own preferred alternative. "What is the status of concepts taken from everyday language relative to scientific concepts?" is a meta-question about which there is considerable debate in the philosophical literature, none of which is even cited, much less discussed. Instead, Pervin tantalizes the reader with hints about differences between single words and open-ended descriptions and then retreats to the tepid conclusion that the "relation

between folk concepts and psychological concepts would appear to be ... problematic." Critics must be made of stronger stuff!

The final evidence subsection, "Prediction: Back to the .30 Barrier?", presents a bleak picture of the incremental validity of personality attributes as predictors of performance in applied contexts. Pervin may be correct here; the evidence is far from complete. My previous "befuddlement" over the contradictory findings from two surveys of the literature (Goldberg, 1993) has now been cleared up by a paper by Ones, Mount, Barrick, and Hunter (in press). As background, a meta-analysis by Barrick and Mount (1991) found that measures of Factor III (Conscientiousness) were predictive of job performance, which logic suggests must be true. On the other hand, another meta-analysis (Tett, Jackson, & Rothstein, 1991) found that measures associated with Factor II (Agreeableness) were more highly related to job performance than measures of Factor III, which seems strange. The new critique by Ones et al. (in press) shows that Tett et al.'s analyses were incorrect, and thus I no longer need to feel befuddled.

The topic of "evidence" consumes the lion's share of Pervin's critique. The remaining sections focus on "more fundamental issues," such as the definition of the trait concept. My overall reaction to these sections is that this sandwich needs more beef. For example, Pervin writes: "What I find quite remarkable today is that for some the definition of a trait has been broadened to include thoughts, feelings, and motives as well as overt behavior." For some? For whom does a trait not include all that stuff? Indeed, in the next few sentences he acknowledges that "trait theorists have been ambiguous in this regard." What he means is that different people have defined traits in different ways. Each person could be completely non-ambiguous, but, by inventing a fictive category of "trait theorist," he commits the logical error of assuming that everyone he tosses into that category must think alike. As another example, Pervin writes: "At this point, one may be tempted to ask for the true trait theorist to stand up. Not only are there definitional differences among trait theorists but also differences concerning conceptual status." Should not such differences serve to make one wonder about the category into which these individuals are all classified?

The section entitled "Dynamic, Patterned Aspects of Personality Functioning" brims with buzzwords like *dynamic, systems, interplay, multidetermination, equipotentiality, equifinality, pattern, organization, synthesis, unity, coherence, complexity, and integration*—none of which are defined. "Unfortunately," Pervin argues, "this area remains neglected by trait theorists." As Ronald Reagan used to say, there he goes again! Once more he concocts a category of trait theorists and then chides those he so classifies for neglecting to use the same terms that he prefers (e.g., "I think that

[*coherence*] is a good term," "... the essence of personality [is] the dynamic interplay among the parts of a system that can be characterized by varying degrees of complexity, organization, and integration").

Finally, Pervin lists four major conclusions:

1. "Rather than being a serviceable system, the trait model is, I would suggest, fundamentally flawed in terms of its ability to come to grips with the issues of personality dynamics and personality pattern and organization." (Translation: I have invented a category, "trait model," and this invention does not include some things that I think are important.)
2. "... the trait concept is fundamentally static in nature and therefore cannot be adequate to the task of describing or explaining personality in terms of the functioning of a dynamic system." (Translation: To be "static" is bad, and to be "dynamic" is good; therefore, whatever I call *static* is bad, as are all those I've classified as trait theorists.)
3. "... trait theorists express only one of many possible models of personality." (So, what else is new?)
4. "In sum, it seems to me to be premature to suggest that we have discovered the basic foundations of personality and that all subsequent efforts must be based on this core foundation." (Just who made this suggestion? Who even hinted at it?)

These four statements reflect my concerns about Pervin's entire critique: He has invented a category of scientists whose only common feature is some viewpoint different from his own, and then he expects them all to speak in a common voice. He berates members of this category for not using his favored language. He restates old truisms as fresh criticisms. And, he whips straw dogs. Isn't it fair to ask critics to do better than this?

#### Note

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## A Functionalist Agenda for Trait Psychology

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Pervin provides an eye-opening analysis of the virtues and the hazards of trait psychology (in its current canonical five-factor form). His target article reminds us that sometimes real progress provides such a sense of understanding that it is possible then to forget the work left to be done. Have we reached this pivotal juncture with the recent successes of the five-factor model (FFM) of personality traits? Are we so busy celebrating the replicability, stability, and inclusiveness of the FFM of personality structure that we have forgotten some of our most central tasks as personality psychologists? Have the impressive strides in the analysis of personality trait structure actually distanced us further from an understanding of personality processes—what people “do” and to what ends they do it? Or, instead, are we ready to turn the developments in trait psychology into a generation of exciting research on personality functioning in daily life contexts (Buss & Cantor, 1989; McCrae & Costa, in press)?

As Pervin has pointed out here and elsewhere, theories of personality should have components describing (a) the structures that give rise to individual differences and (b) the processes by which these are manifested. Cantor (1990) placed this argument in Allportian terms of what personality “has” and what it “does.” Recent developments in trait psychology have made great strides in explicating one aspect of what personality has, traits, but at the same time have often neglected the other crucial part of the equation. One cannot help but be impressed by the consistency in trait factor structures, but do they meaningfully capture personality in vivo? Because of the relative neglect of issues of what personality “does,” it is difficult to accept the claim that trait psychology and personality psychology are the same thing.

Pervin presents two classes of critiques of the FFM of personality—a critique of the evidence base for the

model itself and a critique of traits as a (comprehensive) model of personality. We concentrate on the latter class of arguments, emphasizing in particular what is often left out of a characterization of personality when the FFM serves as the central guiding framework. We argue that a comprehensive trait framework for personality simply must do a better job of embedding personality processes within the contexts of people’s lives (Veroff, 1983; Walsh, Craik, & Price, 1992) and within the purposes for which they strive (Pervin, 1989). Without such a commitment to the “doing” side of personality, the triumphs of the FFM will be but abstract, static, and incomplete testaments to the richness of individuality, even as higher and higher piles of supporting evidence on replicability, stability, and inclusiveness are produced.

### The “Doing” Side of Personality: Context and Function

An irony of trait psychology is that, although the data come largely from self-reports, it remains for the most part a psychology of the stranger because the portraits of people are abstracted from the context of daily lives and from the tasks that people are trying to accomplish (see McAdams, 1992). However, this does not need to be the case. There are multiple ways to analyze lives-in-contexts, and multiple functional schemes that can serve as the basis for developing a close-up view of personality. With the reader’s indulgence, we first briefly consider our own attempts to provide such a view of personality functioning, and then we move on to ways in which more directly trait-based approaches also look at personality in action.

In our research, we use experience-sampling and daily-diary methods to chart the patterning of behavior and affect in daily-life contexts (e.g., Cantor et al.,

