Asserting the Definition of Personality

John D. Mayer
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Are definitions of the term *personality* vague and contradictory? This question was raised in the symposium, "Pressing Topics in the Future…" – at the 2007 *Association for Research in Personality* preconference. At the time, I argued that definitions of personality were in general agreement with one another. I contended that the perceived problems with personality definitions were not due to the definitions themselves – but rather, were due to the failure of personality psychologists to use and *assert* those definitions. Here, I would like to explain, and in one instance, qualify, what I meant – for I see the use of clear and consensual definitions as one key to the further regeneration of our discipline.

So, to begin, are our definitions of personality truly in agreement?

Consensus Definition(s) of Personality: Theme and Variation

I believe there is one central definition of *personality* in use today (and historically) within our discipline. Although it is worded differently by various psychologists, its central idea remains the same:

> personality is a system of parts that is organized, develops, and is expressed in a person's actions.

The "system of parts," includes such components as motives, emotions, mental models, and the self. Authors of at least five personality textbooks were present at the pre-conference. To make my case, here are the definitions of personality (or personality psychology, in one case) from their five textbooks:

- Personality refers to an individual's characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, together with the psychological mechanisms – hidden or not – behind those patterns (Funder, 2004, p. 5).

- Personality is the set of psychological traits and mechanisms within the individual that are organized and relatively enduring and that influence his or her interactions with, and adaptations to, the intrapsychic, physical, and social environments (Larsen & Buss, 2005, p. 4).

- Personality psychology is the *scientific study of the whole person*…psychology is about many things: perception and attention, cognition and memory, neurons and brain circuitry…We try to understand the individual human being as a complex whole…[and] to construct a scientifically credible account of human individuality (McAdams, 2006, p. 2).

- Personality is the organized, developing system within the individual that represents the collective action of that individual's major psychological subsystems (Mayer, 2007, p. 14).

- Personality refers to those characteristics of the person that account for consistent patterns of feelings, thinking, and behaving (Pervin, Cervone & John, 2005, p. 6).

My reading of those definitions is that they are very similar. In fact, since the beginning of psychology, personality psychology, as imagined by Wilhelm Wundt, was viewed as the discipline that studied how the measures of a person's mental life are organized. I believe the textbook definitions above are compatible with and reflective of the agreed-upon nature of the field. Our discipline has been charged with, and has sought to provide, a coherent look at what other

psychologists study: organizing and integrating how the parts of personality work together (Mayer, 2005).

Possible Objections to the Consensus Position

I believe the definitions above share in common the view that (a) personality is a psychological system, (b) composed of a group of parts (c) that interact, (d) and develop, and (e) that impact a person's behavioral expression. Clear enough (to me).

So why did some at the conference view personality definitions as contradictory? If you look at definitions of personality used outside of our field, there is a striking schism. For example, *social psychology* textbooks tend to lead off with an individual-differences definition of personality – and sometimes simply leave it at that. To give one example: "…personality psychologists generally focus on **individual differences**—the aspects of people's personalities that make them different from others" (bold from the original; Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2005, p. 11). Other textbooks lead with the individual differences approach, and then qualify it by noting that personality psychologists also study how the parts of personality operate as a whole (e.g., Baumeister & Bushman, 2008, p. 11; p. 25; Brehm, Kassim, & Fein, 2005, p. 10; Kenrick, Neuberg, & Cialdini, 2005, p. 25).

I suspect individual-differences definitions are emphasized because they make a quick, clean contrast with social psychology. Unfortunately, that quick and easy contrast does not accurately represent activity in our field. As Pervin, Cervone and John (2005, p. 6) put it, personality looks at human universals and individual uniqueness as well as individual differences. Given the large number of students who take social psychology, this misdirection as to what personality psychologists study is unfortunate indeed.

Asserting the Definition of Personality Psychology

Given that there is agreement within the field as to what *personality* means, I think we have an opportunity to assert our definition. As personality psychologists join and work together to enhance our field and help our coordinate disciplines, we need to use and apply our definitions of personality. By "asserting the definition," I mean using it in a motivated fashion to explain who we are, to teach about personality psychology, and to help others by studying personality. *Really* applying these definitions involves letting others know what the definitions are, and then helping others to understand their implications. It may sometimes mean policing ourselves and others in the proper use of the term. Such actions, I believe, involve a sort of consciousness-raising about personality psychology.

Consciousness-Raising and the Definition of Personality

Here, then, are some examples of the consciousness-raising that I have personally been carrying out – and invite you to join me in – regarding our discipline. I begin with small but crucial changes, and work up to broader, more ambitious activities.

1. Use the term, "Personality" properly ourselves (and encourage others to do so). Personality consists of the study of major psychological systems and their interaction. For that reason, we must reflect that personality is a very inclusive concept in our writing. This means a phrase such as:

"Table 1 shows the results for the measures of personality, emotion, and intelligence…" should normally raise a red flag, because intelligence and emotional variables are (to me) *part* of what make up personality.

Such usage, I believe, should be replaced with,

"Table 1 shows the results for such personality variables as the Big Five, a mood scale, and an IQ test."

As a second example, we would replace, "The researchers studied emotional intelligence, personality variables, and demographic variables,"

with "The researchers studied such personality variables as emotional intelligence, socio-emotional traits assessed by the Eysenck Personality Inventory, and related demographic variables."

2. Foster and encourage the identification of relevant personality research. A second assertion of the definition means to be willing to identify personality research and personality-relevant research which is not so-labeled. At least a few articles appearing in cognitive psychology, emotions, and quite a few in social psychology actually are articles in personality psychology. These especially include many studies of the self and self-regulation.

3. *Educate others as to how we define our discipline.* Whereas personality psychologists know what we study, those in neighboring disciplines sometimes use other definitions of our field. As already noted, one example of that is the use of an individual differences definition in social psychology textbooks. That definition simply cannot hold because it divides off our crucial focus on human universals as well as individual differences.

By educating others about what we might well regard as mis-definitions of what we study, personality psychologists can better assist those in social psychology to enrich their understanding of our discipline and how the things that social psychologists study, such as the self and attitudes, compare and contrast with the interests of personality psychologists.

4. Welcome those who study personality psychology and acknowledge their contributions. For many years, personality psychology was viewed by some as a weak and unpromising area of research. We all know of individuals in neighboring fields who might happily label themselves personality psychologists, except that they fear being perceived as unscientific. I have a number of colleagues in neighboring fields that I frequently invite to identify themselves as personality psychologists.

Privately, these psychologists sometimes acknowledge their interest in the area. I think recognizing and welcoming other psychologists who study the personality system – whether it be

examining important traits of personality, dynamics such as self-regulation and self-expression, or key interactions among systems, can go a long way toward fostering interest and openness to our field.

*Broader Implications of Recognizing
and Using Our Own
Definition of Personality Psychology*

There are some broader implications of recognizing and educating others about our own definition of personality psychology. I think by more plainly beginning to work through the definition of personality we will rediscover the core parts of our discipline: the study of the collective action of the parts of personality.

In so doing, we may begin to address some very key and perplexing issues in the discipline. For example, in the same "Pressing Topics" symposium I described at the outset, Julie Norem, ARP President, inquired of us, "What is the necessary training of a personality psychologist?" I think this is a crucial question, and the definition of personality gives us some clues. Although this is a topic for a team of us to expand upon, the definition suggests that training should include, for example, education so as to understand the basics of major psychological subsystems (e.g., motives, emotions, intelligence, the self, etc.), various multivariate techniques and models necessary for understanding how parts work together, and, perhaps, general systems concepts such as feedback systems, important at a theoretical level for comprehending how systems work.

Conclusions

A malaise was expressed about conflicting and vague definitions of personality at our recent conference. I have argued that the problem isn't with our own definitions of personality -- personality psychologists are surprisingly univocal in their perception of what we study. The problem is rather asserting our definition: using it, and teaching others to use it. In this brief comment, I have outlined some ways we can use the definition.

If this appeals to you, I invite you to do the following. Next time you see a misuse of the term personality in an article or a textbook, discuss it with the individual or author. Psychologists of all

disciplines understand the importance of expertise and respecting others' perspectives. Discussing what personality is with a colleague may get them thinking about how to more accurately represent the discipline the next time they speak or write about what it is we do.

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