Free Traits, Personal Projects and Idio-Tapes: Three Tiers for Personality Psychology

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McAdams has invoked and extended the Allportian ideal of a truly integrative personology by proposing a three-tier framework to guide personality theory and research. It is an intriguing and valuable proposal. Each of the three levels that he regards as essential to a complete personology (traits, concerns, and narratives) appears in exemplary reflexive fashion in his target article: He displays admirable scholarly traits, completes an estimable project, and spins us a fine tale. I both praise McAdams and propose a modification of his three-level structure. Hence my subtitle, "Three Tiers for Personality Psychology," may be intoned with a slurred voice and taken both as a celebratory invocation and an alternative structural formulation of three levels for personality research.

I propose some realignments of the McAdamite framework that I believe will strengthen the structure. I propose that Level 1 (Traits) be expanded by incorporating the concept of free traits. I suggest compressing the overly stretched Level 2 (Concerns) by focusing on personal projects and other personal action constructs (PAC) units that provide a needed coherence at this level. Finally, I propose an angular reorientation of Level 3 (life stories) in which narratives are related not only by the telling of modernist stories but by other, postmodern communications devices, such as idio-tape recorders.

The perspective that informs my suggested revision to the framework is a social-ecological one (e.g., Little, 1987) in which individuals are seen as living at the convergence of several concentric rings of influence, including physical environment and social, cultural, and biological spheres of influence. Through the mounting of personal projects (Level 2) individuals are able to integrate the disparate, and at times conflicting, demands of their personal contexts (Little, 1995).

I. Free Traits:
The Social Ecology of Human Natures

Although McAdams has been an articulate critic of orthodox and contemporary trait models in the past, he has accorded traits a foundational role in his integrative framework. He explicitly suggests some interlevel research possibilities (such as looking at the type of narratives told by individuals differing in Level 1 traits), though he has elsewhere expressed concern that we not force connections between the levels (McAdams, 1994). However, I believe cross-buttressing the structure by strengthening interdomain links is not only justified but essential to the viability of the personological mission.

Consider, for example, the trait of extraversion. Viewed from a psychophysiological perspective (e.g., Eysenck & Eysenck, 1985), extraversion is seen as a disposition to seek out stimulation, particularly social stimulation, due to chronic neocortical understimulation. Such influences, likely genetic in origin, might be said to comprise our first natures, by which I mean conduct that is directly reflective of biologically rooted (not merely physiologically based) dispositions.

But our conduct is not only rooted in first natures, it is also routed through the second natures we derive from transactions with our social ecology. The social ecological affordances, constraints, niche opportunities, and climate characteristics enjoin us to act in particular ways, and those may conflict with our first natures. Such behaviors can become habitual, overlearned patterns of action. They become our second natures. Extraversion, for example, is not only a hereditary trait; it is also a social construction (e.g., Semin & Gergen, 1990). Individuals use culturally attuned schemata about how introverts and extraverts act and how the conditions under such acts are appropriately made manifest. For example, one person may believe that if the situation is a social gathering, then she will act extravertedly, whereas if it is an interview for a bank loan, more circumspect conduct will be deployed. As Mischel and Shoda (1995) recently argued, such situationally contingent conduct takes the form of idiosyncratic patterns of if–then relationships that prove to be stable aspects of human personality and serve as behavioral signatures differentiating individuals from each other.

It is also possible to mount personal projects (Level 2) explicitly intended to achieve the goal of acting extravertedly (or in another trait-like fashion). These tasks may be undertaken over protracted periods of time and be communicated to self and others in narrative form such as "resolving to behave in a more sociable way at school this year" or "acting more circumspectly

in the lab." I believe that such conduct may entail physiological costs unless individuals are able, on occasion, to find escape niches in which to indulge their first natures. But the essential point is that individual differences in styles of responding at Level 1 might also be looked at as strategic projects and as narrative acts.

Such dispositions might be called *free traits*. Despite their having a physiological base, these consistent individual differences may show considerable plasticity. Rather than error variance in measurement of Level 1 constructs, however, the nature of the variability of free-traited behavior may lie in constructs imported from Levels 2 and 3, from the projects we are concerned about and the narrative stories we are living. It is likely that some traits are freer than others, that some afford possibilities for modulation and expression more readily than others do. But even at Level 1, the ground level of individual differences in personality for McAdams, there are social ecological influences on individuals that allows first natures to be muted, dampened, amplified, suspended, and shaped whether they arise from personal conviction, the need for public approbation, or random gusts of whimsy.

In short, I think it would be helpful if we were to establish a Free Trait Agreement (perhaps part of a General Agreement on Traits and Trends) in which we accept the proposition that relatively stable dispositional qualities of human personality can and do cross between the boundaries of Levels 1, 2, and 3 with relative (but not absolute) impunity. Border checks on the autonomic costs incurred for acting too much out of character would almost certainly be prudent for the state of the individual and promising for the state of personality psychology.

II. Personal Projects: Centering the PAC Spectrum

McAdams has depicted Level 2 Personal Concerns as a rather disorganized, inchoate domain. But this is due more to the overly expansive category width he has applied in defining Level 2 than to the folks on the second floor being particularly messy. Specifically, I think it important to differentiate what I have called PAC units from other constructs that McAdams identifies at Level 2. I believe there is a family resemblance and coherence to PAC units that, although far less developed than the Big Five taxonomy at Level 1, can provide both a strengthening of the conceptual framework at Level 2 and the possibilities for cross-level bridgework.

Three of the units McAdams depicts as Level 2 constructs—personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), personal projects (Little, 1983), and life tasks (Cantor, 1990)—represent different points on what could be regarded as an internal–external PAC spectrum (Little, 1993). I believe that personal strivings reflect the most internal, self-defining aspects of human action, whereas life tasks more closely reflect external, culturally mandated, and socially constructed forms of action. Personal projects represent the middle ground and can serve to center the PAC spectrum. Personal strivings techniques specify that individuals are to generate examples of goals for which they are typically striving that are then appraised on relevant dimensions. Life task analysis explicitly asks respondents to identify how their current pursuits align with normative life tasks for their particular life situation and then appraise those tasks. Personal projects analysis generally does not prescribe or proscribe the kinds of activities, pursuits, or concerns that are to be appraised (although it can and has been adapted to do so). Consequently, personal projects are generated that represent both life tasks and personal strivings as well as the more idiosyncratic and "one-off" pursuits that may capture distinctive features of the self at a given point in one's life. In Kellian terms, tasks, projects, and strivings have overlapping ranges, but differing foci of convenience. The subtle differences in the elicitation procedures entail that strivings are likely to be more closely linked with Level 1 constructs, tasks will be more attuned to normative concerns (arguably showing stronger ties with Level 3), and projects will draw from both ends of the PAC spectrum.

One consequence of the broad range of content themes elicited through personal projects analysis is the possibility of examining the frequency and appraisal of projects focused on different domains such as interpersonal or work projects. For example, extraverted respondents generally appraise their personal projects as more meaningful and efficacious than do introverted respondents, but particularly in the interpersonal domain (Little, Lecci, & Watkinson, 1992). At an even finer level of analysis, when interpersonal projects are disaggregated into those involving family and those involving strangers, it is projects involving strangers that are the most positively appraised for extraverts, suggesting the possibility that extraverts' interpersonal projects may reflect a Level 1 need for stimulation (Little, 1993). Once again, there seem to be interlevel linkages and cross-buttressing possibilities here that lends credence to the heuristic value of the McAdams framework.

Of particular significance for the modified framework are the correlates and consequences of an important category of personal project we call "intrapersonal projects." Such projects are concerned with aspects of one's own personality or life and how to change, im-

prove, or work on that aspect of self (e.g., "deal better with my jealousy;" "try to be more outgoing"). Although relatively low in frequency in the protocols of our respondents, they have shown reliable and theoretically interesting patterns of covariation with measures of depression, well-being, and creativity (Little, 1989, 1993). Individuals showing evidence of depressive affect have more problematic intrapersonal projects; those higher on well-being have fewer (Little, 1993; Salmela-Aro, 1992). However, creative, open individuals also engage in such projects. In their case, however, intrapersonal projects appear to be self-defining constructive endeavors (myself as a piece of art in progress) rather than a problem to be solved. I think there is a striking similarity between intrapersonal projects and aspects of the narrative process of selfing described by McAdams, particularly among the projects of those regarded as highly creative. McAdams (1994, pp. 309–310) has expressed some concerns about whether his foundational structure is best seen as hierarchical or may be better configured as three horizontal domains. I suspect that there are several ways in which the foundational elements he proposes may be structured to promote creative inquiry in personology, including the occasional collapsing of the three-tiered levels themselves. Indeed our own research suggests that a frequently found feature of the lives of our respondents involves the integrated folding of all three levels into a single endeavor: that of struggling with stories about trait concerns. Here the analytic distinction between different levels of personality dissolves in tiers as individuals live all three levels simultaneously in pursuit of a sense of coherence (Little, 1989).

III. Idio-Tapes:
The Multimediated Nature of
Personal Narratives

McAdams's delineation of his own research on life stories is a fine contribution to this burgeoning literature. It will become mandatory reading for serious personologists concerned with the narrative turn in the social sciences. Two recent contributions to the field should also occupy places of honor on our third-level bookshelf.

Oatley (1992) recently presented a compelling integration of cognitive, affective, and narrative theory that is highly compatible with McAdams' perspective and is particularly strong on the interplay between Level 2 and Level 3 constructs and the vital role played by the thwarting of plans in the genesis of emotion. Similarly, Theodore Sarbin's Murray Award address on the poet-

ics of identity at the 1995 American Psychological Association convention (Sarbin, 1995) deserves special notice. It is quite simply a tour de force: a beautifully crafted integration of the themes of cultural myth, personal narrative, and social disintegration. It also represents the continued refinement of a contextualist narrative psychology that Sarbin began about a quarter of a century before most of us realized that we were speaking prose.

These three closely related works in narrative psychology will have a major impact on the way I will teach personality psychology in the future and collectively provide a needed antidote to a 25-year pedagogical itch that I have suffered. Beginning with my first course in personality psychology, I have asked students to prepare a two-page, single-spaced personal sketch (or life story). They are not restricted to any particular format but are given the splendid Kellian instruction of writing "from the perspective of someone who knows you very well—perhaps even better than you know yourself." They choose a pseudonym that they keep for the course (throughout which they complete various Level 1 and Level 2 assessment instruments) and have their sketch run off for all members of the class on the second day of lectures. As part of the course requirements, students keep a journal in which they apply concepts and insights drawn from the course material to their own sketch or sketches of others in the class. Toward the end of the course, I have asked students which theories and which assessment devices they would now count as most informative in terms of understanding themselves and in terms of helping others understand them. Over the years more than a few students have commented that, after all the theories and assessment devices have been considered, they still feel that the personal sketch they were asked to complete on the first day of class contained the most important insights that they could convey to others.

That was the itch: awareness that I had been treating the life story as only a pedagogical tool rather than as a substantive source of personality theorizing, with the added discomfort that the students had caught on to this before I did. Starting this year, and largely as a result of McAdams's detailed treatment of how to use personal stories as analytic lenses, I will round out my lectures by coming full circle to their personal sketches and truly see ourselves at the beginning of the course for the first time. The sketch will be the scratch.

The students' personal sketches also raise another point relevant to McAdams's article: the extent to which the written narrative is already retreating into the mists of a vanishing modernism while other forms of story telling and self making are emerging before our

e-mail strained eyes. Most of the sketches and journals have followed a fairly conventional narrative form ("It all began on a snowy Ottawa night ..."). Recently, though, students have used different formats (one of the most innovative was a musical rendering of the student's NEO–PIR facet scores).

Frequently students invoke current videoculture conventions, and my students and I have subsequently begun to explore the use of video formats for capturing life stories (see Melia-Gordon, 1993). At first, we carried out real videotape explorations following the pioneering work of Kenneth Craik in this area (Craik, 1991). We had been intrigued by Craik's observation that coders playing back the videos would often feel a "fastforward" impulse in which they skipped through the quotidian boredom to get to the interesting (and as Craik suggests, possibly spurious) aspects of daily lives. It dawned on me that one way we might exploit the richness of videotape without enduring some of its encumbrances would be to conceive of it in metaphorical terms as a way of helping people describe their personal projects and personal contexts (Little, 1995). I call this *idio-tape analysis*, emphasizing the personalized, idiographic focus on identifying salient aspects of one's life by reporting them as though seen through an ultraflexible viewfinder. Idiographers are encouraged to focus on salient objects or scenes, to pan to their surrounding ecosystem, and to frame their hopes, fears, current commitment, and possible futures.

Explorations with idio-tapes (at least with our video-literate students) allows us to winnow down the range of concerns that they choose to discuss with us. It is interesting that in our very early stages of this research we noted that personal relationships are a common focus for our student respondents, lending some independent support to the ecological relevance of the research on close relationship narratives by Holmes and his colleagues (e.g., Murray & Holmes, 1994). We anticipate that the "adaptive illusory glow" that appears in micronarratives about intimates may be paralleled in the ideo-tape accounts. Certainly there is a rich metaphorical repertoire for exploration, including zoom lenses, affective filters, sound tracks, and split screen "color commentary" by third parties.

Another postmodernist phenomenon that has implications for the teaching of personality has been the inordinate growth of the Internet and its potential for expanding the number and nature of lives that can be sketched (including, of course, sketches from class "participants" in far-flung corners of the world). E-mail can also be used to make the task of personal sketch creation a more interactive project. The pedagogical, psychological, and ethical implications of the Internet and related media are starting to receive imaginative attention (Taylor & Saarinen, 1994).

The use of methods such as idio-tape analyses, Internet personal sketching, and other techniques arising from feminist research such as role collage and femmage (Cartwright, 1994) allow us to address the postmodern self in more vivid fashion than through traditional narrative. Although McAdams directly confronts the issue of postmodernity in his target article, one senses that his sentiments and methodological preferences are still modernist in tone and spirit. This is particularly apparent in his closing section, where he invokes standards for good narrative form such as coherence, reconciliation, and generative integration. But the postmodern self and the media through which it is both constructed and communicated would not be well served by invoking such criteria. Consider a person whose life was conveyed by images that were fragmentary, partially occluded, unintegrated, and imbued with a tone of bitter, ironic cynicism. If I read McAdams correctly, such a life depiction would both comprise an uncompelling story and display a lack of mature identity. Viewed from the postmodernist perspective, however, such a story may be more compelling were it communicated through a medium (e.g., multimedia art) that was sensitive to juxtapositional irony, absurdity, and fusions of the real and the animated. Of course it might be retorted that modern literature, from stream of consciousness and *la chosisme* to the unfolding present, has both afforded and validated such depictions of self. But the egalitarian nature of the new media has changed things. Selfing may itself be constructed in, not just conveyed through, entirely new lenses. For the contemporary I the medium is the Me, and it is multimediated.

A final point regarding the case McAdams makes for Level 3. He claims that the level of narrative story telling provides the capacity for coherence in a way not afforded by the other levels of his framework. In an important sense I believe this is true. But it seems that there is a conflation of two types of coherence throughout the target article that needs to be addressed. Although life stories may well be the route through which individuals are able to provide a sense of coherence in their own lives, it is not necessarily the tier from which we might best provide the coherent and integrative vision necessary for the field of personality psychology.

Not surprisingly, I think it is at Level 2 that the greatest possibilities exist for providing personology with a sense of coherence (Little, 1989). Those of us toiling away on Tier 2 can hear both the trait-ers in the cellar and the story tellers in the loft and feel intimately familiar with both our neighbors. In fact, we have an unfolding project at Tier 2. We plan a party where the

whole personological house can get together and celebrate a prefuturist toast to the field as we approach the millennium. It will be held at our place, on the second floor. But that, as McAdams would be the first to tell us, is another story. .

Note

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In Defense of the Individuality of Personality Theories

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A few years ago, a colleague and I taught some undergraduate honors students how to score the Sentence Completion Test (SCT) for ego development (Loevinger, Wessler, & Redmore, 1970). Each student did an honors thesis on a different topic, and they cooperated to administer and score all the tests. One studied the relation of the Five Factors as measured by the NEO–PI (Costa & McCrae, 1985) to ego development as measured by the SCT. Another studied Type A

versus Type B personality in relation to the five factors. One studied sex differences of the college student subjects on the SCT. Another studied published suicide notes in terms of the writers' inferred ego stage.

Reading their theses at semester end, I was troubled that, although each student was thoroughly immersed in her own chosen approach to personality as if it were the whole field, no one asked how all these topics could be viewed together. I began to feel like Alice, looking