Commentary:

It's all in the eye of the beholder:

Personality and personality disorder as interpersonal phenomena

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Abstract

We welcome Hopwood's timely analysis and fully concur with his emphasis on interpersonal dynamics as central to personality development. We discuss four areas of agreement: the advantages of a dimensional approach, the limitations of a trait approach, the need to shift from a categorical to a dimensional approach, and the centrality of interpersonal dynamics. We place even greater emphasis on the interpersonal, arguing personality and PD is largely in the eye of the beholder: the stability of personality and rigidity of PD are relational phenomena.

In our commentary we focus on four issues discussed by Hopwood. First, we are largely in agreement with his brilliant analysis of the current unhelpful divide between clinical and basic psychologists. Second, we agree with Hopwood that trait models of personality are typically unable to answer the simple lay man's question: "why is this person doing that right now, and how should I respond?" (Hopwood, this issue, p.57). Third, we also agree that the recent shift towards more dimensional models of personality pathology is more productive than a focus on discrete categories (Fonagy, Luyten, Allison, & Campbell, 2017; Luyten & Blatt, 2011). Finally, we concur with Hopwood that interpersonal theory provides a particularly powerful lens for conceptualizing personality, and PD in particular (Luyten & Blatt, 2011).

With regard to the first issue, the current divide in personality psychology is part of a wider problem, which in our view largely results from the different socialization practices and incentives that govern the academic and the clinical world. Knowledge of the clinical literature on personality and PD is often seen as no longer relevant. This has for instance led to caricatural depictions of and bias against psychodynamic views in many curricula of psychologists and psychiatrists (Abbass, Luyten, Steinert, & Leichsenring, 2017). In this context, we were somewhat surprised that Hopwood portrayed psychodynamic contributions as instrumental in static and categorical approaches of PDs, while in effect a focus on the dynamics of PDs are the most central feature of psychodynamic contributions.

Second, although Hopwood discusses the limitations of trait personality approaches in capturing what is most essential in personality (and PDs) – i.e., between situation, within situation and within person dynamics – one important set of findings that further limits their explanatory power and validity is not discussed by Hopwood. Meta-analyses haven shown the limited stability and predictive power of purportedly stable personality factors such as internal working models of attachment, and that this lack of stability is largely explained by the lack of

stability of the environment (Fraley, 2002; Fraley & Brumbaugh, 2004; Fraley & Roberts, 2005; Fraley, Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Owen, & Holland, 2013; Fraley, Vicary, Brumbaugh, & Roisman, 2011). Similarly, simulation studies show that the 'stability' of neuroticism found in studies is in large part due to the stability of the environment (Fraley & Roberts, 2005). Hence, personality, and as we will argue below PD, is best seen as an *adaptation strategy* in response to environmental demands. Trait models have notable difficulties incorporating these findings.

Third, in light of the current evidence, a shift towards more dimensional models of personality pathology is, as Hopwood convincingly argues, unavoidable. Hopwood's analysis is somewhat unclear in this regard, however, as on the one hand he suggests we should move way from discrete PD diagnoses, but in the final part of his paper he provides an interpersonal analysis of several categories of PD. Research on the so-called general psychopathology (p factor) underlying common psychopathologies may be particularly helpful here, as models containing a higher order p factor provide a better fit to the data than models with three high-order factors (internalizing, externalizing and thought disorder) . (Caspi et al., 2013; Del Giudice, 2016; Laceulle, Vollebergh, & Ormel, 2015; Lahey et al., 2015; Murray, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2016). This p factor thus appears to be transdiagnostic vulnerability factor that may elucidate the hierarchical structure of personality and PDs in particular (Sharp et al., 2015), as the search for specific types of PDs may have been hampered by the presence of a general psychopathology factor underlying all these disorders.

Finally, we could not agree more with Hopwood that personality and PDs are interpersonal phenomena. Recent evolutionary and developmental accounts of personality development have centrally focused on the uniquely human capacity for social communication, and the capacity for epistemic trust in particular. Epistemic trust refers to the capacity to be open to the reception of social communication that is personally relevant and of generalizable

significance (Mascaro & Sperber, 2009; Sperber et al., 2010; Wilson & Sperber, 2012). From a developmental perspective, attachment figures, by being able to mentalize the infant, play a central role in putting the infant into a 'learning mode', that is to open the mind of the child to social communication. Mentalizing refers to the capacity to interpret one's own mind and that of others in terms of intentional mental states (such as feelings, desires, and wishes). Attachment figures' mentalizing skills also support the social re-calibration of the mind (i.e., they can help to change the child's thoughts, feelings, opinions, and desires when required by changing environmental demands). Yet, any type of adversity (i.e., abuse, maltreatment) either alone or in combination with other factors that may negatively impact on this process (e.g., genetic vulnerability, temperamental factors), may generate a chronic state of epistemic mistrust and epistemic hypervigilance. As a result, the individual lacks the capacity to benefit from social communication in such a way that enables them to adapt to their environment. The 'rigidity' that follows from this state of social isolation and alienation then typically tends to be attributed by scientists and lay persons alike to features of the individual instead of features of their *own relationship to the individual*. However, the observed 'stability' and 'rigidity' of the personality of the individual is actually an adaptation strategy. 'Stability' is observed only insofar as the mechanisms that underpin it are active. Hence, the so-called stability of personality and PD is in the eye of the beholder. Furthermore, mentalizing impairments have been amply described in PDs, but to our surprise were not discussed in Hopwood's paper, although his emphasis on the role of 'perceptual distortion' is entirely consistent with this approach, and would place his views more squarely in the more familiar and empirically supported domains of developmental psychopathology and neuroscience (Luyten & Fonagy, 2015).

In summary, we share Hopwood's concern that research by both personality theorists and clinical researchers should increasingly move into new directions, and towards a more interpersonal understanding of personality and PDs in particular.

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