

What Do We Know When We Know a Person?

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ABSTRACT Individual differences in personality may be described at three different levels. Level I consists of those broad, decontextualized, and relatively nonconditional constructs called "traits," which provide a dispositional signature for personality description. No description of a person is adequate without trait attributions, but trait attributions themselves yield little beyond a "psychology of the stranger." At Level II (called "personal concerns"), personality descriptions invoke personal strivings, life tasks, defense mechanisms, coping strategies, domain-specific skills and values, and a wide assortment of other motivational, developmental, or strategic constructs that are contextualized in time, place, or role. While dispositional traits and personal concerns appear to have near-universal applicability, Level III presents frameworks and constructs that may be uniquely relevant to adulthood only, and perhaps only within modern societies that put a premium on the individuation of the self. Thus, in contemporary Western societies, a full description of personality commonly requires a consideration of the extent to which a human life expresses unity and purpose, which are the hallmarks of identity. Identity in adulthood is an inner story of the self that integrates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future to provide a life with unity, purpose, and meaning. At Level III, psychologists may explore the person's identity as an internalized and evolving life story. Each of the three levels has its own geography and requires its own indigenous nomenclatures, taxonomies, theories, frameworks, and laws.

One of the great social rituals in the lives of middle-class American families is "the drive home." The ritual comes in many different forms,

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but the idealized scene that I am now envisioning involves my wife and me leaving the dinner party sometime around midnight, getting into our car, and, finding nothing worth listening to on the radio, beginning our traditional post-party postmortem. Summoning up all of the personological wisdom and nuance I can muster at the moment, I may start off with something like, "He was really an ass." Or adopting the more "relational" mode that psychologists such as Gilligan (1982) insist comes more naturally to women than men, my wife may say something like, "I can't believe they stay married to each other." It's often easier to begin with the cheap shots. As the conversation develops, however, our attributions become more detailed and more interesting. We talk about people we liked as well as those we found offensive. There is often a single character who stands out from the party—the person we found most intriguing, perhaps; or the one who seemed most troubled; maybe the one we would like to get to know much better in the future. In the scene I am imagining, let us call that person "Lynn" and let us consider what my wife and I might say about her as we drive home in the dark.

I sat next to Lynn at dinner. For the first 15 minutes, she dominated the conversation at our end of the table with her account of her recent trip to Mexico where she was doing research for an article to appear in a national magazine. Most of the people at the party knew that Lynn is a free-lance writer whose projects have taken her around the world, and they asked her many questions about her work and her travels. Early on, I felt awkward and intimidated in Lynn's presence. I have never been to Mexico; I was not familiar with her articles; I felt I couldn't keep up with the fast tempo of her account, how she moved quickly from one exotic tale to another. Add to this the fact that she is a strikingly attractive woman, about 40 years old with jet black hair, dark eyes, a seemingly flawless complexion, clothing both flamboyant and tasteful, and one might be able to sympathize with my initial feeling that she was, in a sense, "just too much."

My wife formed a similar first impression earlier in the evening when she engaged Lynn in a lengthy conversation on the patio. But she ended up feeling much more positive about Lynn as they shared stories of their childhoods. My wife mentioned that she was born in Tokyo during the time her parents were Lutheran missionaries in Japan. Lynn remarked that she had great admiration for missionaries "because they really believe in something." Then she remarked: "I've never really believed in anything very strongly, nothing to get real passionate about. Neither did my parents, except for believing in us kids. They probably believed

in us kids too much.” My wife immediately warmed up to Lynn for this disarmingly intimate comment. It was not clear exactly what she meant, but Lynn seemed more vulnerable now, and more mysterious.

I eventually warmed up to Lynn, too. As she and I talked about politics and our jobs, she seemed less brash and domineering than before. She seemed genuinely interested in my work as a personality psychologist who, among other things, collects people’s life stories. She had been a psychology major in college. And lately she had been reading a great many popular psychology books on such things as Jungian archetypes, the “child within,” and “addictions to love.” As a serious researcher and theorist, I must confess that I have something of a visceral prejudice against many of these self-help, “New Age” books. Still, I resisted the urge to scoff at her reading list and ended up enjoying our conversation very much. I did notice, though, that Lynn filled her wine glass about twice as often as I did mine. She never made eye contact with her husband, who was sitting directly across the table from her, and twice she said something sarcastic in response to a story he was telling.

Over the course of the evening, my wife and I learned many other things about Lynn. On our drive home we noted the following:

1. Lynn was married once before and has two children by her first husband.

2. The children, now teenagers, currently live with her first husband rather than with her; she didn’t say how often she sees them.

3. Lynn doesn’t seem to like President Clinton and is very critical of his excessively “liberal” policies; but she admires his wife, Hillary, who arguably is more liberal in her views; we couldn’t pin a label of conservative or liberal to Lynn because she seemed to contradict herself on political topics.

4. Lynn hates jogging and rarely exercises; she claims to eat a lot of “junk food”; she ate very little food at dinner.

5. Lynn says she is an atheist.

6. Over the course of the evening, Lynn’s elegant demeanor and refined speech style seemed to give way to a certain crudeness; shortly before we left, my wife heard her telling an off-color joke, and I noticed that she seemed to lapse into a street-smart Chicago dialect that one often associates with growing up in the toughest neighborhoods.

As we compared our notes on Lynn during the drive home, my wife and I realized that we learned a great deal about Lynn during the evening, and that we were eager to learn more. But what is it that we

thought we now knew about her? And what would we need to know to know her better? In our social ritual, my wife and I were enjoying the rather playful exercise of trying to make sense of persons. In the professional enterprise of personality psychology, however, making sense of persons is or should be the very *raison d'être* of the discipline. From the time of Allport (1937) and Murray (1938), through the anxious days of the "situationist" critique (Bowers, 1973; Mischel, 1968), and up to the present, upbeat period wherein we celebrate traits (John, 1990; Wiggins, in press) while we offer a sparkling array of new methods and models for personality inquiry (see, for example, McAdams, 1994a; Ozer & Reise, 1994; Revelle, 1995), making sense of persons was and is fundamentally what personality psychologists are supposed to do, in the lab, in the office, even on the drive home. But how should we do it?

Making Sense of Persons

One of the downsides of attending dinner parties is telling people I am a psychologist and then hearing them say things such as "I bet you're trying to figure me out" or "Oh, good, maybe you can tell me what makes my husband (wife, son, daughter, friend, etc.) tick." "Figuring out" a person, trying to determine "what makes her tick"—these well-worn clichés do indeed refer to personologists' efforts to make sense of persons. The figuring out seems to involve the two separate but related procedures of description and explanation. Epistemologically, description seems to come first. One must be able to describe the phenomenon before one can explain it. Astute social scientists know, however, that what one chooses to describe and how one describes it are influenced by the kinds of explanations one is presuming one will make. Thus, describing persons is never objective, is driven by theory which shapes both the observations that are made and the categories that are used to describe the observations, and therefore is, like explanation itself, essentially an interpretation. Despite the subjective, interpretive nature of description and despite the fact that descriptions and explanations are not neatly separable, scientists of all stripes must still make sense of phenomena by offering a detailed description of events—so that others may know *what is*—and *then* offering a causal explanation for what has been described—so that others may know *why it is*. In studying persons, the "what is" refers to personality structure ("what it looks like") and function ("how it works"). The "why it is" (or "what makes it tick") often translates into "how it came to be," urging the psycholo-

gist to discern the causes, origins, roots, determinants, and reasons for the “what is,” be those reasons nature or nurture, be they internal or external, be they biological, social, cultural, economic, or whatever.

I am mainly concerned in this article with the “what is” rather than the “why it is.” This is not to suggest that personality description is more important or more exciting than explaining why. But I will submit that good explanation depends upon good description, whereas the reverse is not necessarily true, and that personality psychologists are sometimes too eager to explain away phenomena before they have adequately identified the phenomena they are trying to explain. If I am going to know Lynn well (realizing, of course, that one never “truly” knows another in full, perhaps not even oneself), I must first be able to offer a full description of her personality. My speculations about how that personality came to be (which orients me to the past in some sense) or, if I am a clinician, how that personality may be changed (which orients me to the future) depend on a good understanding of what that personality is—here and now. To know Lynn well, then, is first and foremost to describe her fully to another. A great deal of “sense making” in personality psychology, and in life, takes place in the description.

Description is a translation of observations into communicable form, typically in our society into the form of words. In the drive home, my wife and I are translating our observations into words. The translation serves the dual purpose of enabling us to communicate with each other and of sharpening, modifying, and organizing our observations so that they can be made more sensible. The making sense of Lynn began when I first met her, as I suspect the making sense of Dan did for her, but it is given a tremendous boost when words are found and exchanged in the car to depict the evening’s events. The personologist, too, must find the right words to depict the observations that have been made, to make sense of the data. But what the personologist does in making sense of people differs in two important ways from what my wife and I do at and after the party. First, the observations that the personologist makes are likely to be more systematic and structured, via standardized questionnaires, laboratory citations, ethnographic inquiries, content analysis, etc. Second, the personologist will or should push much harder than my wife and I will to organize the observations and measurements into a meaningful system or framework.

How should this organization take place? Allport (1937) proposed an organizational scheme emphasizing traits. He distinguished among

cardinal, central, and secondary traits as the main structural units of personality, while arguing that a comprehensive understanding of the person must ultimately incorporate noncomparative, idiographic information about the particular person in question. Cattell (1957) offered a more complicated but scientifically conventional system, distinguishing between surface and source traits for starters and then dividing source traits into ability, temperament, and dynamic traits. Dynamic traits were further decomposed into biological ergs, attitudes, and sentiments. Assessments of these various sorts of traits could be combined with measurements of a person's momentary "states" and customary "roles" into a "specification equation" in order to predict the person's behavior. By contrast, Murray (1938) seemed less interested in predicting behavior per se and more concerned with providing a conceptual framework that could cut the widest possible swath across the conscious and unconscious terrain of personality. At minimum, an adequate personological portrait in Murray's terms should encompass descriptions of the well-known psychogenic needs for sure, but it should also describe complexes, proceedings, serials, durances, and recurrent needpress themata that characterize a particular life in time (McAdams, 1994a). For Murray, there were many different levels upon which personality might be observed and described, and the different levels were not necessarily commensurate with each other.

Since the time of Allport, Cattell, and Murray, personality psychologists have offered a number of different schemes for describing persons. For example, McClelland (1951) proposed that an adequate account of personality requires assessments of stylistic traits (e.g., extraversion, friendliness), cognitive schemes (e.g., personal constructs, values, frames), and dynamic motives (e.g., the need for achievement, power motivation). In the wake of Mischel's (1968) critique of personality dispositions, many personality psychologists eschewed broadband constructs such as traits and motives in favor of more domain-specific variables, like "encoding strategies," "self-regulatory systems and plans," and other "cognitive social learning person variables" (Mischel, 1973). By contrast, the 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a strong comeback for the concept of the broad, dispositional trait, culminating in what many have argued is a consensus around the five-factor model of personality traits (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993; MacDonald, this issue; McCrae & Costa, 1990). Personality psychologists such as A. H. Buss (1989) have essentially proclaimed that personality *is* traits and only traits. Others are less sanguine, however, about the ability of the Big Five trait

taxonomy in particular and the concept of trait in general to provide all or even most of the right stuff for personality inquiry (Block, in press; Briggs, 1989; Emmons, 1993; McAdams, 1992, 1994b; Pervin, 1994).

Despite the current popularity of the trait concept, I submit that I will never be able to render Lynn “knowable” by relying solely on a description of her personality traits. At the same time, a description that failed to consider traits would be equally inadequate. Trait descriptions are essential both for social rituals like the post-party postmortem and for adequate personological inquiry. A person cannot be known without knowing traits. But knowing traits is not enough. Persons should be described on at least *three separate* and, at best, *loosely related levels* of functioning. The three may be viewed as levels of comprehending *individuality* amidst otherness—how the person is similar to and different from *some* (but not all) other persons. Each level offers categories and frameworks for organizing *individual differences* among persons. Dispositional traits comprise the first level in this scheme—the level that deals primarily with what I have called (McAdams, 1992, 1994b) a “psychology of the stranger.”

The Power of Traits

Dispositional traits are those relatively nonconditional, relatively decontextualized, generally linear, and implicitly comparative dimensions of personality that go by such titles as “extraversion,” “dominance,” and “neuroticism.” One of the first things both I and my wife noticed about Lynn was her social dominance. She talked loudly and fast; she held people’s attention when she described her adventures; she effectively controlled the conversation in the large group. Along with her striking appearance, social dominance appeared early on as one of her salient characteristics. Other behavioral signs also suggested an elevated rating on the trait of neuroticism, though these might also indicate the situationally specific anxiety she may have been experiencing in her relationship with the man who accompanied her to the party. According to contemporary norms for dinner parties of this kind, she seemed to drink a bit too much. Her moods shifted rather dramatically over the course of the evening. While she remained socially dominant, she seemed to become more and more nervous as the night wore on. The interjection of her off-color joke and the street dialect stretched slightly the bounds of propriety one expects on such occasions, though not to an alarming extent. In a summary way, then, one might describe Lynn, as she be-

came known during the dinner party, as socially dominant, extraverted, entertaining, dramatic, moody, slightly anxious, intelligent, and introspective. These adjectives describe part of her dispositional signature.

How useful are these trait descriptions? Given that my wife's and my observations were limited to one behavioral setting (the party), we do not have enough systematic data to say how accurate our descriptions are. However, if further systematic observation were to bear out this initial description—say, Lynn were observed in many settings; say, peers rated her on trait dimensions; say, she completed standard trait questionnaires such as the Personality Research Form (Jackson, 1974) or the NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1985)—then trait descriptions like these, wherein the individual is rated on a series of linear and noncontingent behavior dimensions, prove very useful indeed. This optimistic spin on trait assessment is a relatively recent development in personality psychology. In the midst of the situationist critique of the 1970s, traits were virtually constructs non grata among personality psychologists. As recently as 1980, Jackson and Paunonen wryly observed that “trait theorists” seemed to be viewed “like witches of 300 years ago. . . . [T]here is confidence in their existence, and even possibly their sinister properties, although one is hard pressed to find one in the flesh or even meet someone who has” (p. 523).

No longer witches, trait psychologists now publicly proclaim the cross-situational consistency and longitudinal stability of personality dispositions. Looking over the past 20 years of research on traits, one can see at least five reasons that the concept of trait has emerged from the situationist critique as a powerfully legitimate mode of personality description (McAdams, 1994a):

1. *Traits are more than mere linguistic conveniences.* Standard situationist rhetoric of the 1970s had it that traits are in the minds of the observers rather than in the behavior of the people they observe (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Similarly, Shweder (1975) argued that trait ratings simply reflect observers' biases about how different words are associated with each other in language. A significant body of research, however, shows that these critiques were probably more clever than true (Block, Weiss, & Thorne, 1979; Funder & Colvin, 1990; Moskowitz, 1990). Trait attributions based on careful observations reflect real differences in behavior and personality of the people being rated.

2. *Many traits show remarkable longitudinal consistency.* Longitudinal studies of the 1980s demonstrate that individual differences in many traits, such as extraversion and neuroticism, are quite stable over long periods of time (Conley, 1985; McCrae & Costa, 1990). Stability has

been demonstrated when trait scores come from self-ratings, spouse ratings, or peer ratings. Some have suggested that longitudinal stability in traits is partly a result of a substantial genetic underpinning for dispositional differences. Twin studies consistently estimate that as much as 40% to 50% of the variance in trait scores may be attributed to genetic factors (e.g., Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal, & Tellegen, 1990; Dunn & Plomin, 1990).

3. *Aggregation shows that traits often predict behavior fairly well.* Beginning with Epstein (1979), studies consistently show that individual differences in personality traits are often strongly correlated with individual differences in theoretically related behavior when behavior is aggregated across situations. Individual differences in traits can often account for a substantial amount of variance in aggregated behaviors (Kenrick & Funder, 1988).

4. *Situational effects are often no stronger than trait effects.* Funder and Ozer (1983) reexamined some of the most well-known laboratory studies of the 1960s and 1970s demonstrating significant effects for *situational variables* in predicting behavior. They found that the statistical effects obtained in these studies were typically no higher than those obtained in studies employing personality traits. Funder and Ozer argued that while trait scores may sometimes account for only modest amounts of variance in behavior, it appears that carefully measured situational variables often account for no more.

5. *Trait psychologists have rallied around the Big Five.* The most important development in trait psychology of the 1980s was the emergence of the Big Five model. Factor-analytic findings from many recent studies converge on a five-factor model of personality traits. The broad five factors may be labeled Extraversion (E), Neuroticism (N), Openness to Experience (O), Conscientiousness (C), and Agreeableness (A). The Big Five scheme appears to be the first truly comprehensive and consensual description of the trait domain to appear in the history of personality psychology (Digman, 1990). This is not to say that the Big Five is the last word on traits. But the model is an impressive achievement, and it has substantially enhanced the position of trait psychology in the eyes of the scientific community.

The Problem with Traits

It is easy to criticize the concept of trait. Trait formulations proposed by Allport (1937), Cattell (1957), Guilford (1959), Eysenck (1967), Jackson (1974), Tellegen (1982), Hogan (1986), and advocates of the

Big Five have been called superficial, reductionistic, atheoretical, and even imperialistic. Traits are mere labels, it is said again and again. Traits don't explain anything. Traits lack precision. Traits disregard the environment. Traits apply only to score distributions in groups, not to the individual person (e.g., Lamiell, 1987). I believe that there is some validity in some of these traditional claims but that traits nonetheless provide invaluable information about persons. I believe that many critics expect too much of traits. Yet, those trait enthusiasts (e.g., A. H. Buss, 1989; Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993) who equate personality with traits in general, and with the Big Five in particular, are also claiming too much.

Goldberg (1981) contended that the English language includes five clusters of trait-related terms—the Big Five—because personality characteristics encoded in these terms have proved especially salient in human interpersonal perception, especially when it comes to the perennial and evolutionary crucial task of sizing up a stranger. I think Goldberg was more right than many trait enthusiasts would like him to be. Reliable and valid trait ratings provide an excellent “first read” on a person by offering estimates of a person's relative standing on a delimited series of general and linear dimensions of proven social significance. This is indeed crucial information in the evaluation of strangers and others about whom we know very little. It is the kind of information that strangers quickly glean from one another as they size one another up and anticipate future interactions. It did not take long for me to conclude that Lynn was high on certain aspects of Extraversion and moderately high on Neuroticism. What makes trait information like this so valuable is that it is comparative and relatively nonconditional. A highly extraverted person is generally more extraverted than most other people (comparative) and tends to be extraverted in a wide variety of settings (nonconditional), although by no means in all.

Consider, furthermore, the phenomenology of traditional trait assessment in personality psychology. In rating one's own or another's traits on a typical paper-and-pencil measure, the rater/subject must adopt an observational stance in which the target of the rating becomes an object of comparison on a series of linear and only vaguely conditional dimensions (McAdams, 1994c). Thus, if I were to rate Lynn, or if Lynn were to rate herself, on the Extraversion-keyed personality item “I am not a cheerful optimist” (from the NEO), I (or Lynn) would be judging the extent of Lynn's own “cheerful optimism” in comparison to the cheerful optimism of people I (or she) know or have heard about, or

perhaps even an assumed average level of cheerful optimism of the rest of humankind. Ratings like these must have a social referent if they are to be meaningful. The end result of my (or her) ratings is a determination of the extent to which Lynn is seen as more or less extraverted across a wide variety of situations, conditions, and contexts, and compared to other people in general. There is, therefore, no place in trait assessment for what Thorne (1989) calls the conditional patterns of personality (see also Wright & Mischel, 1987). Here are some examples of conditional patterns: "My dominance shows when my competence is threatened; I fall apart when people try to comfort me; I talk most when I am nervous" (Thorne, 1989, p. 149). But to make traits into conditional statements is to rob them of their power as nonconditional indicators of general trends.

The two most valuable features of trait description—its comparative and nonconditional qualities—double as its two greatest limitations as well. As persons come to know one another better, they seek and obtain information that is both noncomparative and highly conditional, contingent, and contextualized. They move beyond the mind-set of comparing individuals on linear dimensions. In a sense, they move beyond traits to construct a more detailed and nuanced portrait of personality, so that the stranger can become more fully known. New information is then integrated with the trait profile to give a fuller picture. My wife and I began to move beyond traits on the drive home. As a first read, Lynn seemed socially dominant (Extraversion) and mildly neurotic (Neuroticism). I would also give her a high rating on Openness to Experience; I would say that Agreeableness was probably medium; I would say that Conscientiousness was low-to-medium, though I do not feel that I received much trait-relevant information on Conscientiousness. Beyond these traits, however, Lynn professed a confusing set of political beliefs: She claimed to be rather conservative but was a big fan of Hillary Clinton's; she scorned government for meddling in citizens' private affairs and said she paid too much in taxes to support wasteful social programs, while at the same time she claimed to be a pacifist and to have great compassion for poor people and those who could not obtain health insurance. Beyond traits, Lynn claimed to be an atheist but expressed great admiration for missionaries. Beyond traits, Lynn appeared to be having problems in intimate relationships; she wished she could believe in something; she enjoyed her work as a free-lance writer; she was a good listener one-on-one but not in the large group; she expressed strong interest in New Age psychology; she seemed to think her parents

invested too much faith in her and in her siblings. To know Lynn well, to know her more fully than one would know a stranger, one must be privy to information that does not fit trait categories, information that is exquisitely conditional and contextualized.

Going beyond Traits: Time, Place, and Role

There is a vast and largely unmapped domain in personality wherein reside such constructs as motives (McClelland, 1961), values (Rokeach, 1973), defense mechanisms (Cramer, 1991), coping styles (Lazarus, 1991), developmental issues and concerns (Erikson, 1963; Havighurst, 1972), personal strivings (Emmons, 1986), personal projects (Little, 1989), current concerns (Klinger, 1977), life tasks (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1987), attachment styles (Hazan & Shaver, 1990), conditional patterns (Thorne, 1989), core conflictual relationship themes (Luborsky & Crits-Christoph, 1991), patterns of self-with-other (Ogilvie & Rose, this issue), domain-specific skills and talents (Gardner, 1993), strategies and tactics (D. M. Buss, 1991), and many more personality variables that are both linked to behavior (Cantor, 1990) and important for the full description of the person (McAdams, 1994a). This assorted collection of constructs makes up a second level of personality, to which I give the generic and doubtlessly inadequate label of *personal concerns*. Compared with dispositional traits, personal concerns are typically couched in motivational, developmental, or strategic terms. They speak to what people want, often during particular periods in their lives or within particular domains of action, and what life methods people use (strategies, plans, defenses, and so on) in order to get what they want or avoid getting what they don't want over time, in particular places, and/or with respect to particular roles.

What primarily differentiates, then, personal concerns from dispositional traits is the contextualization of the former within time, place, and/or role. Time is perhaps the most ubiquitous context. In their studies of the "intimacy life task" among young adults, Cantor, Acker, and Cook-Flanagan (1992) focus on "those tasks that individuals see as personally important and time consuming at particular times in their lives" (p. 644). In their studies of generativity across the adult life span, McAdams, de St. Aubin, and Logan (1993) focus on a cluster of concern, belief, commitment, and action oriented toward providing for the well-being of the next generation, a cluster that appears to peak in salience around middle age. Intimacy and generativity must

be contextualized in the temporal life span if they are to be properly understood. By contrast, the traits of Extraversion and Agreeableness are easily defined and understood outside of time. They are not linked to developmental stages, phases, or seasons.

The temporal context also distinguishes traits on the one hand from motives and goals on the other. Motives, goals, strivings, and plans are defined in terms of future ends. A person high in power motivation wants, desires, strives for power—having impact on others is the desired end state, the temporal goal (Winter, 1973). To have a strong motive, goal, striving, or plan is to orient oneself in a particular way in time. The same cannot be readily assumed with traits. Extraversion is not naturally conceived in goal-directed terms. It is not necessary for the viability of the concept of extraversion that an extraverted person strive to obtain a particular goal in time, although of course such a person may do so. Extraverted people simply *are* extraverted; whether they try to be or not is irrelevant. The case is even clearer for neuroticism, for the commonsense assumption here is that highly neurotic people do not strive to be neurotic over time. They simply are neurotic. While dispositional traits may have motivational properties (Allport, 1937; McCrae & Costa, in press), traits do not exist in time in the same way that motives, strivings, goals, and plans are temporally contextualized. To put it another way, I cannot understand Lynn's life in time when I merely consider her dispositional traits. Developmental and motivational constructs, by contrast, begin to provide me with the temporal context, the life embedded in and evolving over time.

Contextualization of behavior in place was a major theme of the situationist critique in the 1970s (Frederiksen, 1972; Magnusson, 1971). The situationists argued that behavior is by and large local rather than general, subject to the norms and expectations of a given social place or space. Attempts to formulate taxonomies of situations have frequently involved delineating the physical and interpersonal features of certain kinds of prototypical behavioral settings and social environments, like "church," "football game," "classroom," and "party" (Cantor, Mischel, & Schwartz, 1982; Krahe, 1992; Moos, 1973). Certain domain-specific skills, competencies, attitudes, and schemas are examples of personality variables contextualized in place. For example, Lynn is both a very good listener in one-on-one conversations, especially when the topic concerns psychology, and an extremely effective storyteller in large groups, especially when she is talking about travel. When she is angry with her husband in a social setting, she drinks

too much. The latter is an example of a conditional pattern (Thorne, 1989) or perhaps a very simple personal script (Demorest, this issue). Some varieties of personal scripts and conditional patterns are contextualized in place and space: "When I am at home, I am unable to relax"; "When the weather is hot, I think about how miserable I was as a child, growing up in St. Louis"; "If I am lost in Chicago, I never ask for directions." To know a person well, it is not necessary to have information about all of the different personal scripts and conditional patterns that prevail in all of the different behavioral settings he or she will encounter. Instead, the personologist should seek information on the most salient settings and environments that make up the ecology of a person's life and investigate the most influential, most common, or most problematic personal scripts and conditional patterns that appear within that ecology (Demorest & Alexander, 1992).

Another major context in personality is social role. Certain strivings, tasks, strategies, defense mechanisms, competencies, values, interests, and styles may be role-specific. For example, Lynn may employ the defense mechanism of rationalization to cope with her anxiety about the setbacks she has experienced in her role as a mother. In her role as a writer, she may excel in expressing herself in a laconic, Hemingway-like style (role competence, skill) and she may strive to win certain journalistic awards or to make more money than her husband (motivation, striving). In the role of student/learner, she is fascinated with New Age psychology (interests). In the role of daughter, she manifests an insecure attachment style, especially with her mother, and this style seems to carry over to her relationships with men (role of lover/spouse) but not with women (role of friend). Ogilvie (Ogilvie & Ashmore, 1991; Ogilvie & Rose, this issue) has developed a new approach to personality assessment that matches personality descriptors with significant persons in one's life, resulting in an organization of self-with-other constructs. It would appear that some of the more significant self-with-other constellations in a person's life are those associated with important social roles. Like social places, not all social roles are equally important in a person's life. Among the most salient in the lives of many American men and women are the roles of spouse/lover, son/daughter, parent, sibling, worker/provider, and citizen.

For personality psychologists who like order and clarity in their conceptualizations, Level II would appear to be an ill-defined, bulky, and disorderly domain at present. It is, therefore, tempting to try to simplify it by linking it with something that is elegant and well-defined.

Thus, one may sympathize with the efforts of McCrae and Costa (in press) to link personal concerns (Level II) directly to the Big Five traits (Level I). McCrae and Costa distinguish between the "basic tendencies" of personality (Level I: dispositional traits) and "characteristic adaptations," which consist of learned skills, habits, attitudes, and relationships that are the ultimate results of the interaction of personality dispositions with environments. Characteristic adaptations would appear to cover some of the same terrain as Level II. McCrae and Costa argue that characteristic adaptations are essentially derivatives of the interaction between basic tendencies and environmental press. In other words, characteristic adaptations stem ultimately from traits; they are the contextualized manifestations of a person's dispositional signature.

My own position is that one should not be hasty to conceive of Level II as derivative of Level I. Such a conception suggests a hierarchy in personality, wherein smaller units (personal concerns) are neatly nested within larger units (dispositional traits), a scheme probably too pat and orderly to be true. While McCrae and Costa are right to concede that something outside the realm of traits (their "basic tendencies") should be included within the domain of personality, their claim that the "something outside" is essentially a derivative of traits seems premature. I would suggest instead that personologists explore the terrain of Level II directly, without the maps provided by the Big Five. Currently, a number of personality psychologists are making observations, organizing descriptions, and formulating theories about the "middle-level units" that may be found within Level II (e.g., D. M. Buss & Cantor, 1989; Cantor & Zirkel, 1990; Demorest, this issue; Koestner & Aube, this issue; Pervin, 1989; Singer, this issue). Indeed, Ogilvie and Rose (this issue) propose that certain motivational constructs within Level II may be organized into the four categories of "acquire," "keep," "cure," and "prevent." Conceptual efforts like these should be most fruitful when they aim to develop an indigenous theoretical framework for this domain, rather than one derived from Level I.

There is no compelling reason to believe that the language of nonconditional and decontextualized dispositions should work well to describe constructs that are situated in time, place, and role. Consistent with this supposition, Kaiser and Ozer (in press) found that personal goals, or what they term "motivational units," do not map onto the five-factor structure demonstrated for traits. Instead, their study suggests that the structure of personal goals may be more appropriately conceptualized in terms of various content domains (e.g., work, social). It seems

reasonable, therefore, to begin with the assumption that an adequate description of a person should bring together contrasting and complementary attributional schemes, integrating dispositional insights with those obtained from personal concerns. To know Lynn well is to be able to describe her in ways that go significantly beyond the language of traits. This is not to suggest that Levels I and II are or must be completely unrelated to each other, that Lynn's extraversion, for example, has nothing to do with her personal career strivings. In personality psychology, linkages between constructs at these different levels should and will be investigated in research. But the linkages, if they indeed exist, should be established empirically rather than assumed by theorists to be true.

What Is Missing?

As we move from Level I to Level II, we move from the psychology of the stranger to a more detailed and nuanced description of a flesh-and-blood, in-the-world person, striving to do things over time, situated in place and role, expressing herself or himself in and through strategies, tactics, plans, and goals. In Lynn's case, we begin our very provisional sketch with nonconditional attributions suggesting a high level of extraversion and moderately high neuroticism and we move to more contingent statements suggesting that she seems insecurely attached to her parents and her husband, strives for power and recognition in her career, wants desperately to believe in something but as yet has not found it in religion or in spirituality, holds strong but seemingly contradictory beliefs about politics and public service, employs the defense of rationalization to cope with the frustration she feels in her role as mother, has interests that tend toward books and ideas rather than physical health and fitness, loves to travel, is a good listener one-on-one but not in groups, is a skilled writer, is a good storyteller, tells stories that are rambling and dramatic. If we were to continue a relationship with Lynn, we would learn more and more about her. We would find that some of our initial suppositions were naive, or even plain wrong. We would obtain much more information on her traits, enabling us to obtain a clearer and more accurate dispositional signature. We would learn more about the contextualized constructs of her personality, about how she functions in time, place, and role. Filling in more and more information in Levels I and II, we might get to know Lynn very well.

But I submit that, as Westerners living in this modern age, we would

not know Lynn “well enough” until we moved beyond dispositional traits and personal concerns to a third level of personality. Relatedly, should Lynn think of herself only in Level I and Level II terms, then she, too, as a Western, middle-class adult living in the last years of the 20th century, would not know herself “well enough” to comprehend her own identity. The problem of identity is the problem of overall unity and purpose in human lives (McAdams, 1985). It is a problem that has come to preoccupy men and women in Western democracies during the past 200 years (Baumeister, 1986; Langbaum, 1982). It is not generally a problem for children, though there are some exceptions. It is probably not as salient a problem for many non-Western societies that put less of a premium on individualism and articulating the autonomous adult self, although it is a problem in many of these societies. It is not equally problematic for all contemporary American adults. Nonetheless, identity is likely to be a problem for Lynn, for virtually all people attending that dinner party or reading this article, and for most contemporary Americans and Western Europeans who at one time or another in their adult lives have found the question “Who am I?” to be worth asking, pondering, and worth working on.

Modern and postmodern democratic societies do not explicitly tell adults who they should be. At the same time, however, these societies insist that an adult should be someone who both fits in and is unique (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). The self should be defined so that it is both separate and connected, individuated and integrated at the same time. These kinds of selves do not exist in pre-packaged, readily assimilated form. They are not passed down from one generation to the next, as they were perhaps in simpler times. Rather, selves must be made or discovered as people become what they are to become in time. The selves that we make before we reach late adolescence and adulthood are, among other things, “lists” of characteristics to be found in Levels I and II of personality. My 8-year-old daughter, Amanda, sees herself as relatively shy (low Extraversion) and very caring and warm (high Agreeableness); she knows she is a good ice skater (domain-specific skill); she loves amusement parks (interests); and she has strong feelings of love and resentment toward her older sister (ambivalent attachment style, though she wouldn’t call it that). I hazard to guess that these are a few items in a long list of things, including many that are not in the realm of personality proper (“I live in a white house”; “I go to Central School”), that make up Amanda’s self-concept. A list of attributes from Levels I and II is not, however, an

identity. Then again, Amanda is too young to have an identity because she is probably not able to experience unity and purpose as problematic in her life. Therefore, one can know Amanda very well by sticking to Levels I and II.

But not so for Lynn. As a contemporary adult, Lynn most likely can understand and appreciate, more or less, the problem of unity and purpose in her life. While the question of "Who am I?" may seem silly or obvious to Amanda, Lynn is likely to see the question as potentially problematic, challenging, interesting, ego-involving, and so on. For reasons that are no doubt physiological and cognitive, as well as social and cultural, it is in late adolescence and young adulthood that many contemporary Westerners come to believe that the self must or should be constructed and told in a manner that integrates the disparate roles they play, incorporates their many different values and skills, and organizes into a meaningful temporal pattern their reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future (Breger, 1974; Erikson, 1959; McAdams, 1985). The challenge of identity demands that the Western adult construct a telling of the self that synthesizes synchronic and diachronic elements in such a way as to suggest that (a) despite its many facets the self is coherent and unified and (b) despite the many changes that attend the passage of time, the self of the past led up to or set the stage for the self of the present, which in turn will lead up to or set the stage for the self of the future (McAdams, 1990, 1993).

What form does such a construction take? A growing number of theorists believe that the only conceivable form for a unified and purposeful telling of a life is the story (Bruner, 1990; Charne, 1984; Cohler, 1982, 1994; Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Howard, 1991; Kotre, 1984; Linde, 1990; MacIntyre, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988). In my own theoretical and empirical work, I have argued that identity is itself an internalized and evolving life story, or personal myth (McAdams, 1984, 1985, 1990, 1993, in press). Contemporary adults create identity in their lives to the extent that the self can be told in a coherent, followable, and vivifying narrative that integrates the person into society in a productive and generative way and provides the person with a purposeful self-history that explains how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the anticipated self of tomorrow. Level III in personality, therefore, is the level of identity as a life story. Without exploring this third level, the personologist can never understand how and to what extent the person is able to find unity, purpose, and meaning in life. Thus what is missing so far from our consideration of Lynn is her very identity.

Misunderstandings about Level III

Lynn's identity is an inner story, a narration of the self that she continues to author and revise over time to make sense, for herself and others, of her own life in time. It is a story, or perhaps a collection of related stories, that Lynn continues to fashion to specify who she is and how she fits into the adult world. Incorporating beginning, middle, and anticipated ending, Lynn's story tells how she came to be, where she has been and where she may be going, and who she will become (Hankiss, 1981). Lynn continues to create and revise the story across her adult years as she and her changing social world negotiate niches, places, opportunities, and positions within which she can live, and live meaningfully.

What is Lynn's story about? The dinner party provided my wife and me with ample material to begin talking about Lynn's personality from the perspectives of Levels I and II. But life-story information is typically more difficult to obtain in a casual social setting. Even after strangers have sized each other up on dispositional traits and even after they have begun to learn a little bit about each others' goals, plans, defenses, strategies, and domain-specific skills, they typically have little to say about the other person's identity. By contrast, when people have been involved in long-term intensive relationships with each other, they may know a great deal about each others' stories, about how the friend or lover (or psychotherapy client) makes sense of his or her own life in narrative terms. They have shared many stories with each other; they have observed each other's behavior in many different situations; they have come to see how the other person sees life, indeed, how the other sees his or her own life organized with purpose in time.

Without that kind of intimate relationship with Lynn, my wife and I could say little of substance about how Lynn creates identity in her life. We left the party with but a few promising hints or leads as to what her story might be about. For example, we were both struck by her enigmatic comment about passionate belief. Why did she suggest that her parents believed too strongly in her and in her siblings? Shouldn't parents believe in their children? Has she disappointed her parents in a deep way, such that their initial belief in their children was proven untenable? Does her inability to believe passionately in things extend to her own children as well? It is perhaps odd that her ex-husband has custody of their children; how is this related to the narrative she has developed about her family and her beliefs? And what might one make of that last incident at the party, when Lynn seemed to lapse into a different mode

of talking, indicative perhaps of a different persona, a different public self, maybe a different “character” or “imago” (McAdams, 1984) in her life story? One can imagine many different kinds of stories that Lynn might create to make sense of her own life—adventure stories that incorporate her exotic travels and her considerable success; tragic stories that tell of failed love and lost children; stories in which the protagonist searches far and wide for something to believe in; stories in which early disappointments lead to cynicism, hard-heartedness, despair, or maybe even hope. We do not know Lynn well enough yet to know what kinds of stories she has been working on. Until we can talk with some authority both to her and about her in the narrative language of Level III, we cannot say that we know her well at all. On the drive home, my wife and I know Lynn a little better than we might know a stranger. Our desire to know her much better than we know her now is, in large part, our desire to know her story. And were we to get to know her better and come to feel a bond of intimacy with her, we would want her to know our stories, too (McAdams, 1989).

There are numerous indications in the scientific literature that personality psychologists—like their colleagues in developmental and social psychology and in certain other branches of the social sciences (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 1994)—are becoming increasingly interested in narrative and life stories—the stuff of Level III. At the same time, there appears to be considerable confusion and misunderstanding about just what stories are about and how they relate to lives and personality. From the standpoint of my own life-story theory of identity and its relation to multiple levels and domains in the study of persons, let me comment upon four of the more common misunderstandings and confusions:

1. *A story can be a method or a construct, but the two are not the same.* Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of narrative methods in personality psychology, whereby psychologists obtain data from study participants by asking them to tell stories (e.g., Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; McAdams & Ochberg, 1988; Singer, this issue; Thorne, this issue). Such methods can be used to obtain information from persons pertaining to any of the three levels of personality I have identified above. For example, one can learn about defense mechanisms, self-schemas, personal strivings, motives, or even traits by asking a person to tell some kind of story, though story methods work much better for some constructs (e.g., Thematic Apperception Test [TAT] stories for motives) than they do for others (e.g., traits). What is important is that the stories obtained are not the constructs themselves. A TAT

story about success is not achievement motivation itself; rather it is a measure of the construct achievement motivation. Similarly, when an interviewer asks a person to tell the story of his or her own life, the narrative account that is obtained is not synonymous with the internal life story that is assumed, more or less, to provide that person's life with some semblance of unity and purpose. As in the TAT example, the data obtained from a story method may be interpreted to shed light on the life story itself. A person's life story is "inside" him or her in the same sense that a trait, motive, or striving is. The life story is a psychological construct—a dynamic, inner telling or narration, evolving over time—that may be assessed through storytelling methods. Arguably, other methods might be employed as well.

2. *Identity is a quality of the self; it is not the same thing as the self.* The terms "self" and "identity" are often used interchangeably, both by laypersons and psychologists (e.g., Banaji & Prentice, 1994). Following Erikson (1959), however, I believe it is advisable to save the term identity for a rather specific aspect or feature of self. If what James (1892/1963) called the "self-as-object" is all that a person considers or claims to be "me" and "mine," then identity refers to a particular way in which the self may be arranged, constructed, and eventually told. Identity, then, is the quality of unity and purpose of the self. Selves do not need to be unified and purposeful in order to be selves. But, as I argued above, contemporary Western adults tend to demand that their selves be unified and purposeful. In other words, adults demand that their own selves be endowed with identity. How might the self be arranged and told in such a way as to provide it with unity and purpose? By formulating it into a story. Therefore, identity is the *storied self*—the self as it is made into a story by the person whose self it is.

3. *If identity is a story, it must be understood in story terms.* The language of identity is the language of stories, narrative, drama, literature. The language comes from what Bruner (1986) terms the narrative mode of human cognition, rather than the paradigmatic mode of argument, logic, and causal proof. Therefore, identities are best comprehended in such terms as "imagery," "plot," "theme," "scene," "setting," "conflict," "character," and "ending" (McAdams, 1985, 1993). A well-formed, well-functioning identity in contemporary Western society is a "good story," exhibiting such traditionally valued features of Western narrative as coherence, credibility, richness, openness, and integration (McAdams, 1993). Personologists who seek to explore Level III must become comfortable with the language of stories. They must re-

sist attempts to taxonomize and evaluate identities in the traditional terms of traits, types, syndromes, stages, and other well-worn scientific nomenclatures. At the same time, however, they should continue to uphold social-scientific aims of systematic description and explanation, scientific discovery and proof. Contrary to the claims of some social constructivists (e.g., Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992) as well as died-in-the-wool positivists (e.g., Fiske, 1974), life stories are not so fuzzy, so literary in nature, and so culturally embedded that they cannot be systematically observed, classified, categorized, quantified, and even subjected to hypothesis-testing research. It probably does not make sense to factor-analyze stories, or to think of narrative accounts in terms of split-half reliabilities (e.g., does the content of the first half of the story match that of the second?). But creative personologists should be able to undertake systematic, high-quality research employing narrative methods and dealing with narrative constructs if they are sensitive to the grammar of stories and if they are willing to see stories as ends in themselves, rather than as means for investigating other ends.

4. *The three levels of personality description are conceptually and epistemologically independent.* The wrong way to think about the three levels is to imagine a tight hierarchy in which traits give rise to more specific personal concerns, which ultimately coalesce to form a life story. The wrong way suggests that traits are the raw stuff of personality, that personal concerns are contextualized derivatives of traits, and that stories represent a fashioning of personal concerns into a meaningful life narrative. The wrong way suggests that stories are ultimately derived from traits. As I suggested above, I believe it is premature and unwise to view any of the three levels of personality as derivative of another. There are at least two reasons for my caution.

First, whereas the trait domain of Level I appears to be well-mapped at present, Levels II and III are relatively uncharted. The kind of geography that can be said to exist at these levels is simply unknown. As 40 years of trait psychology now attests, a given domain requires a great deal of time and considerable scrutiny before researchers can determine an indigenously adequate structure. Thus, Levels II and III need to be explored on their own terms, for a very long time. Second, the levels do not need to exist in meaningful relation to each other in order to exist as meaningful levels. There is no holy writ dictating perfect hierarchy for conceptions of personality, that is, neat levels feeding into neat levels according to general laws of consistency. Lynn's internalized life story may reflect her traits in a very general sort of way and it may orga-

nize some of her values and strivings into a more coherent form than is obvious at Level II. Then again, her life story may not do much of this at all. Whether the life story is more or less consistent with traits and personal concerns or not, one cannot know Lynn well until one has explored her personality at all three levels. A full knowledge of her traits would tell me virtually nothing about her identity. A full airing of her life story is likely to provide me with virtually no valid data on her traits. Thus, each of the three different levels has a unique legitimacy and "range of convenience," to borrow a term from Kelly (1955). Each may have its own logic and rhetoric; each may require its own methods of inquiry and measurement; and each may inspire its own theories, models, frameworks, and laws.

What Else Is There?

I have argued that in order to know a person well a personologist must obtain data from three distinct and nonoverlapping levels or domains—dispositional traits, personal concerns, and life stories. The three levels provide three very different formats and frameworks for describing a person. Good description is necessary for good explanation. Once the personologist has a full description of "what is," she or he may then proceed to inquire into *why* the "what is" indeed *is*, how it came to be, and how it may be changed. Like description, it is likely that explanation may be specific to level. Explaining the origins of traits may be a very different matter from explaining the origins of a life story. Explanations for personality typically invoke a blend of biology, family, and culture. Current explanations for individual differences in personality traits (Level I) tend to emphasize genetic predispositions over and against shared environments (Dunn & Plomin, 1990; McCrae & Costa, in press). Little is known or even speculated about the origins of constructs to be found in Levels II and III. Given the significant contextualization of personal concerns and life stories in culture and society, it seems likely that viable explanations at these levels would emphasize environmental factors to a greater extent than has proven to be the case with decontextualized, noncontingent personality traits.

There is, of course, more to understanding a person than providing a full description of characteristics residing at the three levels delineated in this article. In both science and social life, description may and often should lead to attempts at explanation. Beyond describing Lynn's traits, concerns, and stories, therefore, I may be able to know her even

better if I am fortunate enough, for example, to explain why she has such a strong trait of social dominance or why her life story, should it turn out to be this way, contains so many villains and no heroes, is punctuated by scenes of contamination (good things turn suddenly bad) rather than redemption (bad things turn suddenly good), portrays recurrent conflicts between themes of power and love, accentuates imagery of darkness (usually bad) and movement (usually good), and, despite its gloomy narrative tone, holds out the hope of a happy ending in the chapters to come.

To explain personality, the investigator must typically summon forth concepts and phenomena that reside outside the realm of personality proper. For example, one may explain the trait of hostility as a manifestation of a particular genetic endowment. While the trait is an aspect of personality, the genetic endowment is typically viewed as the “determinant” of the trait, the explanation for the personality feature rather than the feature itself. To use a parallel example invoking the environment, a disorganized attachment pattern may be explained as the result of repeated physical abuse at the hands of parents. The attachment pattern is an aspect of personality (Level II) whereas the abuse itself exists outside of personality proper, as a cause or reason for a personality feature rather than as the feature itself. The distinction between what is (personality proper) and why it is (determinants of personality) blurs a bit at the level of narrative, for a person may choose to interpret events from his or her past as part of a causal story concerning how he or she came to be. In the case of abuse, therefore, one might incorporate recollections of the negative events into a particular kind of story (“How I triumphed over the past”; “How I was ruined by my family”) to provide life with unity and purpose. The events themselves remain outside the realm of personality proper, but the narration of the events within the life story now becomes part and parcel of personality itself, at Level III. One can now proceed to explain why the individual has created one kind of identity story rather than another.

Therefore, one answer to the question “What else is there?” beyond the levels of dispositional traits, personal concerns, and life stories is that there exists a great deal to know in the realm of explanation, and explanation requires a consideration of biological, environmental, cultural, and other sorts of factors that reside outside the realm of personality proper. Within personality proper, however, one may still imagine other kinds of constructs and phenomena that may not fit readily within my tripartite scheme.

For example, one might argue that the three levels do not leave enough room for what psychoanalysts and other depth psychologists have variously understood to be the unconscious. Should there exist a Level IV wherein reside the deeper and more implicit characteristics of the person? Recently, Epstein (1994) has synthesized some very old ideas and some very new research to argue vigorously for the existence of two parallel information processing systems that appear to link up with two corresponding systems of personality—one rational and conscious and the other implicit, experiential, and unconscious. A reasonable response to this argument may be to view each of the three levels of personality as containing an assumed gradient of consciousness upon which various kinds of constructs might be found. Thus, some traits may be more accessible to consciousness than others, and whereas some personal concerns (e.g., strivings) may be objects of everyday conscious thought, others (e.g., defense mechanisms) may operate outside awareness.

Gradients of awareness may have especially interesting implications at the level of narrative. As Wiersma (1988) has pointed out, some life narrations may be akin to “press releases” in that they provide superficial and socially desirable stories for “public” consumption. Others may probe more deeply and offer more discerning and revealing information about the self. The development of mature identity in adulthood may involve the narration of progressively more discerning self stories over time, as the person moves to transform that which was implicit or unconscious into an explicit narration that defines the self more fully than it was defined before. At any given time, furthermore, there may exist in personality a hierarchy of self-defining narratives, from the most consciously articulated but potentially superficial press releases to the deeper and more revealing life narrations whose existence as integrative stories of the self is only vaguely discerned by the narrator who has created them.

If Freud’s conscious/unconscious distinction, therefore, informs our understanding of levels and domains, a second distinction, made famous by James (1892/1963), offers another challenge to the tripartite scheme. The distinction is between the self-as-subject (the “I” or “ego”) and the self-as-object (the “me” or “self-concept”). To the extent that “self” and “personality” are overlapping realms, the personality itself may be endowed with certain “I” features and certain “me” features. Traits, concerns, and life stories are more easily understood as potential features of the “me”—of the “self-concept”—in that most of the

constructs that we can identify or imagine in these levels seem to be potential objects of the "I's" reflection. In a sense, the "I" (subject) "has" its own traits, acts in accord with its own personal concerns, and narrates its own stories (Cantor, 1990; McAdams, 1994c). But what can be said of the "I" itself?

While some have argued that the "I" is a redundant or unnecessary concept in personality and others have suggested that whatever the "I" is it cannot be known without transforming it into the "me" (making the subject into an object of reflection), still others suggest that the "I" or "ego" is the basic agential process in personality that is responsible for synthesizing human experience (Blasi, 1988; Loevinger, 1976). As such, the "I" is more a verb than a noun—the process of "selfing," of approaching human experience as an agential, synthesizing self. This process may in turn be described and analyzed, as Loevinger (1976) proposes in describing stages of ego development. Research has shown that certain stages of ego development are related to particular personality traits (higher ego stages are correlated with higher scores on Openness to Experience; McCrae & Costa, 1980), to personal concerns (middle-stage individuals value conformity in social settings; higher stage individuals strive for reciprocal interpersonal communication; Rosznafszky, 1981), and to life stories (higher stages are correlated with more complex narratives containing multiple plots and themes of growth through struggle; McAdams, 1985; McAdams, Booth, & Selvik, 1981). Nonetheless, the ego stages do not appear to be conceptually reducible to either traits, concerns, or stories themselves, nor to a combination of the three. Instead, each stage seems to specify how the basic "I" process of meaning-making works, how the "I" is and does, how it engages in the fundamental enterprise of selfing. In the same sense that the "me" results from the "I," traits, concerns, and stories may be, among other things, results of that process, but they are not the process itself.

It is not altogether clear, therefore, how certain constructs that emphasize process (the "I") over content (the "me") fit into the three levels of personality description that I have set forth. The three levels relate most directly to those features of personality that are potential candidates for inclusion within a person's self-concept—the self as "me." These are characteristics of a person that are potential objects of the person's reflection and sources for the personality descriptions that persons typically develop to portray themselves and others to themselves and others. Dispositional traits, personal concerns, and life stories together

provide a full description of a person. While the three levels may not contain the answers to all the questions a personality psychologist might raise about a person, they nonetheless provide explicit guidelines for determining just how well we know a person and, when that knowledge is inadequate, what else we need to know to make our knowledge better.

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