

## Editorial

### Personality and Social Relationships

Personality traits do not exist in a vacuum, they are only meaningful if they are considered together with situations where they lead to the expressions of behaviours. Simply put personality and situations are intimately intertwined in the generation of behaviour. Funder (2006) called this the personality triad. Situations encompass all the environmental input that we experience, including our physical environment and all living beings we interact with. What exactly it is about situations that lead individuals to express their traits in behaviours is not well understood – we are still lacking good taxonomies and measures of environments – but it is a safe bet that a large proportion of what makes situations relevant for people is other people. This special issue on personality and social relationships is concerned with how we can study the interplay of personality traits, social situations and behaviours.

The reason to assume that social situations are especially important for us is not only that humans, as a species, are exceptionally dependent on collaborating with others, with a strong need for social belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and a high sensitivity for social rejection (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), which seems to be universal across cultures (Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, & van Aken, 2008). It is also because humans have reached what has been called ecological dominance (Flinn & Alexander, 2007): Due to our cultural (incl. technological) innovations, we are able to select, modify and construct our environments to suit our needs in a way that no other species could. As a consequence, matters of survival have become negligible for modern humans compared to other species – they hardly ever cross our mind. A decreasing need in everyday life to deal with the physical environment and other species implies a disproportional increase in the relevance of our social environment. If it is not finding food, avoiding predators and seeking the right shelter that determines success in life, it is competing with other for status, money and fame, deciding which role models to learn from, finding good people to rely on, choosing the right romantic partner, and maintaining healthy family relationships that keep us busy and striving.

This peculiarity of the human condition might have had an impact on our personality traits. As I have argued elsewhere (Penke, Denissen, & Miller, 2007; Penke, 2010), the main evolutionary selection pressures that shaped human personality traits have likely come from our social environment. As an example, animal behavioural ecologists, who become increasingly interested in personality research (see the excellent 2010 special issue of *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* on ‘Evolutionary and ecological approaches to the study of personality’) often study a ‘shyness–boldness’ dimension in non-human

animals, but for them it is mainly relevant for exploratory behaviour in novel environments or as a determinant of aggressive versus fearful behaviour when animals face predators. Human personality researchers, on the other hand, use ‘social anxiety’ synonymously with shyness and would hardly question that the expression of boldness requires the context of social spectators and/or competitors. Perhaps relatedly, neuroticism is usually conceptualised as a trait that reflects sensitivity to social and non-social stressors alike, but it seems to be especially the social aspect that matters most to people (Matthews, 2004; Denissen & Penke, 2008).

Since the social environment seems to be of such importance for the study of personality, it is astonishing that much of the research on personality and social relationships is still done independently. This might in part be a historical incident, an unhealthy result of the false person–situation dichotomy (Funder, 2006) and the struggle for scientific dominance and funding fought between personality and social psychologists. But in part it might also be a lack of tools, designs, and an overarching framework that hinders interested researchers to approach this complex topic.

The current special issue makes an attempt to provide just that. It emerged from the PERSOC (for personality and social relationships) young scientists network, which was funded by the German Research foundation (DFG) between 2008 and 2010. It allowed 11 researchers interested in the topic (including myself) to meet six times to discuss how the interplay between personality and social relationships can and should be studied. A major outcome of these meetings is the first article in this special issue (Back et al., 2011a), jointly authored by all original PERSOC members, which introduces a general framework for research on personality and social relationships. It builds on important earlier work, including the Kenny’s (1994) Social Relations Model, Funder’s (1999) Realistic Accuracy Model, Brunswik’s (1956) lens model, and transactional models of personality development (e.g. Neyer & Asendorpf, 2001), which it attempts to combine. It proposes four principles and general processes which characterise how personality traits, social behaviours, and interpersonal perceptions affect the interplay and development of personality and social relationships. That way, it is able to encompass phenomena as diverse as the behavioural expression of traits in social situations, person perception, reputation, acquaintance, social interaction processes, and personality development. It should not be understood as a proposal for an explanatory theory, but a framework that can guide and structure research and facilitate the generation of hypotheses in this field.

There is also a PERSOC website (<http://www.persoc.net/>) that holds more information on the topic, including advise on

research designs and statistical software solutions, for example TripleR (Schmukle, Schönbrodt, & Back, 2010), a package that allows for social relations analyses with the statistical software R.

The framework article is followed by five empirical reports that exemplify how the PERSOC framework can be applied to the study of personality in different social relationships. The datasets on which these studies are based were not collected strictly following the recommendations for research designs given in the framework article. Instead, they showcase how the framework can be applied to the analysis of existing datasets that include information on dispositions and social interaction.

The first empirical article by Denissen, Schönbrodt, van Zalk, Meeus, and van Aken (2011) looks at the antecedents and consequences of peer-rated intelligence. It is based on a longitudinal study of initially unacquainted university freshmen, who provided mutual ratings of intelligence. Using social relations modelling, the authors showed that early peer reputations of intelligence are rather stable and predictive of important outcomes like academic achievement and university drop-out, even over and above psychometric intelligence.

Also using social relations analyses, Back et al. (2011b) found in the Berlin Speed Dating Study that even though people strongly believe that their mate choices will be reciprocated, choices are rather one-sided most of the time. It turned out that flirting behaviour during dates (as rated by observers) is extremely reciprocal and might convey the impression of mutual romantic interest, even though general flirtatiousness (predicted by sociosexuality, extraversion, self-perceived mate value, and attractiveness) does not reflect romantic interest and increased flirting towards selected dates does not increase the chances to be picked. Furthermore, similarity did not help choices to become mutual and high actual and self-perceived attractiveness made men popular but choosy, also contributing to the low reciprocity of mate choices.

Wrzus, Wagner, Baumert, Neyer, and Lang (2011) studied prosocial dispositions and how they affected perceived and actual reciprocity in relationships between adult children and their parents. Their analyses nicely show how the results from social relations modelling can differ significantly from more convenient analytic approaches: While the latter often show asymmetric parent-child relationships, the former show no such differences in their study.

The last two empirical articles in this issue studied romantic couples using the dyadic version of the Social Relations Model, the Actor-Partner Interaction Model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Vollmann, Antoni, Hartung, and Renner (2011) were interested in whether the greater capacity to buffer stress of individuals with a more optimistic personality stems, as optimists believe, from receiving more social support from their partners. Using a longitudinal dyadic design, the authors show that rather than actually receiving more support, optimists have a healthy positive illusion about the supportiveness of their partners.

In the last empirical article, Schröder-Abé and Schütz (2011) demonstrate across two dyadic samples that higher

self-reported emotional intelligence of one partner increases romantic relationship satisfaction, closeness, and commitment in both members of the couple. Using behavioural observations during conflict discussions, they further show that this effect is mediated by greater perspective taking skills in individuals with higher emotional intelligence.

Finally, I am grateful that David Kenny, who made so many seminal contributions to the study of social relationships that inspired the articles in this issue, was willing to provide a closing commentary (Kenny, 2011), in which he shares his thoughts on the PERSOC framework and each of the empirical papers.

I hope that the collection of articles in this special issue will be stimulating and informative for researchers interested in personality and social relationships in general, as well as for those interested in any of the specific social contexts covered by the individual articles. I strongly believe that personality and social situations are too important determinants of those behaviours that really matter in life to be studied independently, certainly not in different psychological disciplines and preferably not in different studies. The recommendations and examples provided in this special issue will hopefully motivate researchers to move the field further towards an integrated understanding of personality and social relationships.

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