

## Applying a Systems Framework to Self-Defining Memories

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In responding to Mayer's painstaking and scholarly proposal for a new framework in the field of personality, I am reminded of Lewin's famous dictum, "There is nothing as practical as a good theory." This sentiment, it seems to me, is the real challenge to Mayer's comprehensive work. I find little to dispute in the systems framework he employs, nor can he be faulted for partisan bias or neglect of any significant concerns in contemporary personality research. Even more, he demonstrates the value of the framework in clarifying his own thinking about the field, and in helping him achieve a fruitful organization for what I assume will be a major new textbook of personality. If these were all the tangible products that were to result from his proposed framework, I would say that the practical result from his theorizing was already highly commendable. Yet Mayer has, with no hint of grandiosity or pretension, offered this framework to the field itself, to help other theorists and researchers come together around a common set of definitions, structural features, and dynamics that constitute, according to Mayer, the larger domain of personality as a scientific discipline. Here then is the more demanding test of the practicality of Mayer's framework: Could other personality researchers besides himself find this framework an organizing and edifying rubric in which their own work could be located and elucidated? Following this question, could Mayer's framework reunite divergent strains of personality research in such a way that both scientists and students will perceive commonalities and shared assumptions that had previously been obscured?

The best way to answer such questions is to put Mayer's framework into practice and to see what results its application can yield. Accordingly, the next part of my commentary consists of my efforts to apply Mayer's systems framework of personality to my own particular interest in personality research—autobiographical memory narratives. I have written extensively elsewhere about the role that certain kinds of autobiographical memories, called *self-defining memories*, can play in affective responses to the present and strivings for the future within the personality (Moffitt & Singer, 1994; Singer, 1990, 1995; Singer & Salovey, 1993). In a special issue of the *Journal of Personality* concerning new frameworks in personality research, I suggested that self-defining memories achieve a convergence in conscious thought of the cognitive, affective, and motivational systems of the person (Singer, 1995). By

bringing to mind a vivid, affectively intense, and psychologically meaningful experience from the past, individuals are more able to make sense of and respond to new and complex situations in the present. Similarly, the importance and affective valence of their future strivings are in part determined by the cognitive and affective information provided by a review of significant past personal experiences (Moffitt & Singer, 1994; Singer, 1990). Personality researchers (McAdams, 1985; Singer & Singer, 1994; Tomkins, 1979) have emphasized the tendency of certain self-defining memories to become "archetypal" and thematically central or "nuclear" for the personality. These nuclear episodes (McAdams, 1985) may play a pivotal role in how individuals interpret and respond to new interactions that resemble these earlier remembered experiences.

How might I locate my work on self-defining memories in Mayer's systems framework of personality? According to the systems framework, I would begin with the process of definition through identification. Application of the identification category aids me in locating self-defining memories within the personality system and with respect to allied, but distinct, systems, such as the biological or familial system. Using Figure 1 from Mayer's article, I can place self-defining memories within the internal personality cube; its position within this space (its left-right or internal-external orientation) might be more to the left or "psychological" direction, because I am more interested in the subjective meaning of the memory than its relation to external circumstances. Researchers interested in assessing the veridicality of autobiographical memories (e.g., memories of abuse or flashbulb memories) would place narrative memories more to the right of internal personality, closer to the external situation.

With regard to the second dimension, the molecular-molar continuum (represented vertically in the cube), I have studied self-defining memories at varying heights within the cube. For example, I have studied how different memories within an individual are linked or share common structural features. Moving up the continuum, I have studied how self-defining memories differ thematically and structurally across individuals. At an even more molar level, I have looked at how self-defining memories reflect aspects of a particular subculture and provide information about a collective identity in addition to meaning on an individual basis (Singer, 1997).

The depth (front to back) within the cube corresponds to an organismic–constructed continuum that differentiates properties of the system that are intrinsic to it from those that are extrinsic and introduced through learning and social interaction. Work that I have done on individuals' earliest self-defining memories tends to reflect a more organismic and sense-oriented experience (i.e., toward the front of the cube), whereas self-defining memories related to relationship and achievement themes draw strongly on socially mediated and learned experiences (i.e., more toward the back of the cube).

The fourth dimension, time, plays an important role in linking self-defining memories to affective responses to both present encounters and future aspirations. Self-defining memories contribute to the continuity of personality by providing a stable and familiar set of experiences that serve as touchstones for any new encounters.

Using this four-dimensional definitional approach also allows me to classify self-defining memories as self-report data located within the internal personality. Observer data or historical details that shed light on self-defining memory accuracy belong in what Mayer calls the "incorporative domain."

#### **Relational Classification of Personality Components and Self-Defining Memories**

In considering how self-defining memories correspond to the "components" of Mayer's framework, the first step would appear to be to define whether self-defining memories are enablers, establishments, themes, or agencies, according to the molecular–molar continuum. Because a self-defining memory is consciously registered and contains cognitive information, affective valence, and a linkage to conative strivings, it should be considered a combination of enablers and therefore qualify as an establishment. Because establishments can vary along the organismic–constructed continuum, I would locate self-defining memories as either self-in-world or self establishments, depending on the content of the memory under study. Some self-defining memories are organized around insights into the nature of the individual (e.g., an incident that reflects personal potential, limitation, or growth), but other self-defining memories are interpersonally based, defining the individual in the context of a relationship or achievement in a work or school setting. In fact, as I consider this separation of self and self-in-world, I am not sure that I sufficiently understand what Mayer is distinguishing here. Most nuclear scenes or possible selves (listed as

self establishments in Figure 2) are highly interpersonal in content and reflect not simply an understanding of self, but of self in the context of others. The self-defining memory as a self-in-world establishment is comprised of affect sequences, role depictions of major characters within the memory, and goals that organize and define the outcome status of the memory (attached motivations).

Self-defining memories as self-in-world establishments can be understood as having critical linkages to "themes" of the personality. Individuals with strong themes of achievement or dominance might be expected to generate different kinds of self-defining memories than individuals with powerful themes of intimacy and nurturance. McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, and Day (1996) found exactly this kind of relationship between individuals rated high in power or intimacy and their corresponding autobiographical memories.

Moving to the most molar level of components, self-defining memories, understood as self-in-world establishments linked to overarching conative self-in-world themes, may be further considered as particularly potent manifestations of personality's agency. For example, a self-defining memory of an infidelity that led to a marital break-up may reflect a deficiency in the personality's superego that has repetitively produced incidents of betrayal and condemnation.

#### **Personality Dynamics and Self-Defining Memories**

Personality dynamics, as articulated by Mayer, are the connections that emerge between different components and levels of the personality system. With regard to self-defining memories, their narratives link cognitive-affective sequences to motivational outcomes through conscious imagery (see Mayer's Table 3). Through affective and goal-based stories, self-defining memories locate the self in the world and provide a dynamic filter through which external experience can be understood. Narrative memories have the capacity to make events in the present matter and to influence individuals' attitudes toward future and anticipated events.

#### **Personality Development and Self-Defining Memories**

Both the cognitive evolution of narrative memories and how the content of self-defining memories might change over the life cycle would clearly be topics that

would fit within Mayer's developmental dimension of personality. Similarly, longitudinal studies of how individuals' selections of their most significant self-defining memories shift through the decades or how their same selected memories might lose or gain affective intensity would allow researchers to assess change and stability within personality. From the incorporative perspective, assessing the narrative memories of cohorts of individuals at certain stages of the life cycle might confirm personality theorists' contentions that some periods are more generative than others, whereas other life stages are more concerned with identity formation than establishing lasting bonds of intimacy.

### Discussion of the Application of the Systems Framework to Self-Defining Memories

Having made a preliminary effort to apply Mayer's systems framework of personality to my own research concerns, I am now in a better position to comment on its utility. Overall, I found its distinctions helpful in locating my work in a larger context of personality theory and modeling. I did find parameters and organizational criteria of some of his distinctions less than clear. For example, one of the dimensions that he employs is a molar versus molecular distinction. I was not fully certain that I could always define what the criteria were for locating a construct higher or lower with regard to its organizational complexity. Similarly, I worried a bit about confounding the molar versus molecular continuum with the organismic versus constructed dimension; their definitions make them sound quite different, but in practice I was less sure.

Within the components category, I found the enabler-establishment-theme-agency categories a very helpful elaboration, adding some conceptual organization to the typical drive-trait-motivation distinctions. However, I was less sure on how the self, world, and self-in-world categories were operationalized. For example, I had a great deal of trouble determining where exactly self-defining memories should be located, as self-in-world or self establishments. The memories certainly correspond to life-story identity, but they are not exclusively concerned with images of the self; they are very often attached thematically and in content to other important people in the participants' lives.

Overall then, how does the systems framework fulfill its goal of organizing and facilitating personality research? I found that the application of Mayer's system to my own research endeavors challenged me to think more deeply and precisely about the location of narra-

tive memory in an intrapersonal and interpersonal space. It highlighted for me that my research choices always reflect my preference for certain levels of organizational complexity, neglecting or minimally attending to others. It also encouraged me to build a greater dimension of time and developmental progression into what have tended to be cross-sectional research designs.

On the other hand, I do not think that the framework has achieved sufficient definitional clarity to be adopted as a paradigm for the entire field of personality, nor would it serve as the most practical outline for a student entering the field of personality research. The abstract nature of many of the terms, coupled with insufficient guidelines about the boundaries between conceptual distinctions, make the possibility of confusion by both the nonsystems researcher and the beginning student a lingering concern.

As an analysis and synthesis of the field of personality, Mayer has made an impressive scholarly contribution. Its practical utility is evident in my own demonstration of how it helps to clarify research on narrative memory. Its larger utility as the "single framework" to guide personality research is less certain. This worthy goal will depend on future efforts to achieve definitional specificity and delineation of conceptual boundaries to the framework. I look forward to these developments and have already benefited from Mayer's gift to the field of personality and the larger discipline of psychology.

### Note

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## Three Compulsions of Stress and Coping Research: A Systems Framework Cure?

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In its organizational elegance and exquisite attention to detail, Mayer's systems framework for personality promises to influence how we communicate our findings to colleagues and students and how we conduct and organize literature reviews. Its four topics, *definition, components, organization, and development*, capture previous organizational schemes, most notably Lazarus and Opton's (1967) *description, determinants, dynamics, and development*, but elaborate and organize these topics in innovative and heuristic ways. Our commentary focuses on how the systems framework might influence methods of investigation in the area with which we are most familiar: stress, coping, and adaptation to adversity. In selecting this focus we do not address the limits of systems approaches (Shames, 1982) nor do we discuss the potential pitfalls of applying frameworks from other fields to organize the subject matter of personality (Gould, 1997a, 1997b). We describe three problems in the stress, coping, and adaptation literature that the systems framework ostensibly should help resolve, and we conclude that the framework requires further elaboration and development to address these problems. The problems, which we call *compulsions*, are: "rediscovering" methods and phenomena, near-exclusive reliance on nomothetic inquiry, and a myopic focus on trait conceptions of personality.

### The Repetition Compulsion: Rediscovering and Relabeling Phenomena

Mayer correctly notes that the traditional segregation of personality components by theory invites "rediscovery" of its parts. Citing Hogan (1994), he reminds us that investigators are inclined to reinvent the wheel and he makes the case that a single coherent framework

for personality's parts might limit such rediscovery. The problem of rediscovery, of course, is not unique to personality psychology. In his *History of Experimental Psychology*, Boring (1950) recognized the dangers of mistaking "old facts and old views for new, and ... [thus being] unable to evaluate the significance of new movements and methods" (p. ix). We are concerned about an insidious form of rediscovery in which identical research designs, methods, and even dependent measures are employed, and identical findings are interpreted as new psychological phenomena. Because Mayer's Figure 2 explicitly mentions learned helplessness as an example of a personality component type (an "establishment") and because the learned helplessness phenomenon is related to our own work on stress, coping, and adaptation, we offer this area of investigation as an example of how such methodological repetition occurs in personality research.

Table 1 demonstrates the remarkable parallels (to put it mildly) between studies of the double bind phenomenon (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1956) that were summarized in the psychopathology literature (e.g., Abeles, 1976; Olson, 1972; Schuham, 1967; Sluzki & Ransom, 1976; Vetter, 1969) and studies of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975) that were published in our most prominent personality journals. The learned helplessness and double bind models are considered by many (including ourselves) to be the most provocative and elegant conceptions of human response to threatening circumstances developed over the past 40 years. Although both models describe how an individual attempts to cope with repeated exposure to threatening circumstances, these models could hardly have been more distinct in describing the nature of the threat, its context, and its consequences. However, as Table 1 demonstrates, the study designs, methods, and even dependent variables addressing these distinct phenomena are identical! Investigators not

