

The multipath approach to personality (MAP): A meta perspective

Acercamiento multidimensional a la personalidad: Una meta-perspectiva

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Abstract

Most current theories of personality and identity provide a less than comprehensive perception into the human psyche. Many scholars argue a more holistic and integrated approach to research and practice is still very much needed. A Multipath Model of Personality (MAP) is presented as a meta-perspective for viewing psychological functioning. The assumption of the MAP model includes the notion that personality and self-system are shaped by the combined forces of evolutionary, biological, situational, mental, as well as psycho-spiritual processes. It is assumed one can use various levels of analysis in the description of psychological functioning, and no one level would be the complete or accurate description. But taken together all levels provide an additive view that constructs a wider and clearer lens for viewing human personality and psychological development.

Key words

Personality Theory, Systems Theory, Integrative Approaches, Transpersonal Psychology

Resumen

La mayoría de las teorías de la personalidad y de la identidad actuales, no proporcionan una idea de la psique humana completa. Muchos expertos defienden que es necesaria una perspectiva más holística e integral en la investigación y en la práctica de este campo de estudio. En este artículo se presenta un modelo multidimensional de la personalidad (MAP) como una meta-perspectiva con la que entender el funcionamiento psicológico. La concepción del modelo "MAP" incluye la idea de que la personalidad y el sistema del "yo", son formados por la combinación de las influencias de los procesos evolutivos, biológicos, circunstanciales, mentales y psicoespirituales. Se entiende que alguien puede usar varios niveles de análisis al describir el funcionamiento psicológico, y que ningún nivel por sí solo podría ser la descripción completa y acertada de todo el conjunto. Pero tomando en cuenta a todos los niveles se obtiene una nueva perspectiva que representa una mayor y más clara visión para entender la personalidad humana y su desarrollo psicológico.

Palabras clave

Teoría de la personalidad, Teoría de sistemas, Enfoques integrativos, psicología transpersonal

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Millon (1994, 1996), together with a number of other critics (Church, 2000; Endler, 1993, Laher, 2007; Schultz & Schultz, 2001) comment that most personality theories fail to adequately address the interaction between the biological, intrapsychic, interpersonal, and environmental aspects of personality development. Therefore they argue that most current theories provide a less than inclusive is still required in the mental health fields. The Multipath Model presented in this paper is an attempt at a meta-perspective model for viewing personality and psychological development.

Sue, Sue, and Sue (2010) do present an expanded view that includes biological, psychological, social and cultural dimensions or paths towards mental disorder-- but this view only focuses on pathology and still may be too restrictive in its scope. The assumptions of the Multipath Approach to Personality (MAP) model is extended to include the notion that the total spectrum of functioning as well as personality is shaped by the combined forces of evolutionary, biological, situational, mental, as well as psycho-spiritual processes--all embedded in a temporal, sociocultural, and developmental context. This model assumes one can use various levels of analysis in the description of psychological functioning, and no one level would be the complete or accurate description. But taken together all levels provide an additive view that constructs a wider perspective for viewing human personality development.

The Multipath Approach to Personality (MAP) consists of following dimensions or levels of analysis: (1) the Neuropersonal; (2) the Intrapersonal; (3) the Interpersonal; (4) the Exopersonal; (5) the Ecopersonal; and (6) the Transpersonal. To use the metaphor of a microscope—one can only focus on one level of magnification at a time, with other levels falling out of focus. Yet beyond observation, all levels remain in synchronized existence.

Neuropersonal Level

A ground level of analysis can be thought of as the “Neuropersonal’ level. Through this viewfinder human beings are viewed as biological and evolutionary organisms. This level or dimension of the self is focused on biological, genetic, and physiological functioning and also represents the “pre-personal” personality field. From this perspective the individual can be primary described as driven by biological and evolutionary mechanisms. Mental processes are seen through a biological lens within the organism, with genetic makeup playing a role in the development or maintenance of personality and some abnormal conditions. Personality is also seen as influenced by temperament –which are biologically based characteristics apparent in early childhood and establish the tempo and mood of an individual’s behavior. Autonomic nervous system reactivity may be inherited. Differences in personality arise from balance of neurotransmitters but can be shaped by learning. Neuroscientists and evolutionary psychologists suggest that our “reptilian brain” (our lizard legacy) influence personality and basic drives of sex aggression, hunger, thirst and basic survival. It is the prerational world of Freud’s Id and the lower survival (deficiency) needs mapped by Maslow (1954). This neuropersonal self influence is often below ego awareness and functions pre-consciously or unconsciously.

Our behavior at this level is often driven by individual and evolutionary life forces, with the basic functions of safety, self-survival, and threat assessment—against hostile environments of the world. This is the base objective of life, or Richard Dawkins' “selfish gene” directive of replication and survival (Dawkins, 1976). Our deepest perceptual systems and our biological and psychological functioning have been organized around those functions of survival and procreation, and natural selection will reward and encode behaviors that serve these goals. Our very biology and behavior mapped from DNA carries the desire to stay alive and protect the (neuropersonal) self-system. Our earlier developed brain functions inherent in limbic and admygdala activation (fear and aggression) often, even today, still take precedent to the more recent frontal cortical emergence in human evolution and self-system expansion.

Reductionism, which is inherent in western science, still often has the “bottom-up” tendency to view human development merely as biological determinism—very much in a linear way. But the reality of human behavior is far more complex, and has multiple reciprocal influences. Studies show environment affects biochemical and brain activity, as well as structural neurological circuitry (Kandel, 2005). The brain/body and neuropsychological systems will hold any prior non-integrated “traumatic” experiences, which are permanent physicochemical and anatomical changes founded in a survival crisis, which have implications for personality development as well as for a wide variety of emotional and physical clinical expressions (and can even be encoded into the family system and perhaps even ultimately in the genetic structure). This often leads to disturbance of affect regulation and the sense of a stable and secure self (intrapersonally as well as interpersonally). Science increasingly is recognizing that the gene-environment interactions appear more complex than simply having a “predisposition” (Wilson, 1975). Studies reveal different forms of same genes interacting with critical development periods in life of individual may trigger some mental disorders, but many additional interacting variables have yet to be identified (Baltes, Reuter-Lorenz, & Rosler, 2006). Evolutionary shifts are always occurring in all our systems--both neuropsychologically and at higher levels of organization of the personality. Living systems would have their neuropsychological correlates, but personality and psychological development should also be seen as increasingly influenced by larger levels in a systemic organization of life.

The Intrapersonal Level

The Intrapersonal level is the psychological and the intrapsychic domain. This is the realm of territory staked out by cognitive science and ego psychology and its intellectual descendents. From childhood into adulthood as the neo-cortex and frontal lobes expand the neural networks, a more differentiated self reflective consciousness develops. But as this occurs we lose a primal sense of oneness with, of participation in a larger, more connected consciousness (which many children may sense and then lose as they are socialized or acculturated). It is at this level we then began to give way to an increasing sense of separation from the whole, with an accompanying growing sense of individual self-consciousness and self-identity beginning to develop.

From this perspective psychological function can, of course, be conceptualized into the “Big Five” personality traits. The Five-Factor Model (FFM) is an empirically supported multidimensional personality model that specifies that most stable individual differences in emotions, cognition, and behavior can be described by five independent domains: Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. In contemporary personality theory, ‘traits’ are seen through the intrapersonal lens as residing within the personal (but may be expressed at other levels) and are empirically related to individual personality and overall global stability. The Big Five structure does not imply that personality differences can be reduced to only five traits. Rather, these five dimensions represent personality at the broadest level of abstraction, and each dimension summarizes a large number of distinct, more specific personality characteristics (John & Srivastava, 1999). A common theme across all traits includes both a perception of self and others and a balance between the cognitive and emotional functions.

Cognitive styles as viewed from this level can be seen as being organized around the before mentioned five traits. For example persons develop "self schema" or other "person schema" around their own traits. For example those individuals who score high in Neuroticism develop cognitive structures that explain and reinforce their emotional reactivity (e.g. people aren't to be trusted). Or persons with high Conscientiousness would operate by a very controlled rule based cognitive structure intrapersonality. The intrapersonal level is also reflected within Freud's concept of ego, and Jung's concept of ego and persona. It is the most “visible” aspect of individuals, and is reflected in cognition and in the development (or lack) in integration and balance of rational and emotional functions (similar to the concept of differentiation of self--

see Bowen, 1978). Like in the Jungian personality systems integration of the big five traits at the midpoint of each trait would be associated with individuation. Poorly individuated persons would develop constant threat-based cognitive schemas (and score low in the Openness trait). Personality and cognitive schemas are also represented in the Jungian archetypes, by which persons either identifies or disowns archetypes as a reflection related to their self system and traits. For example the degree in which the projection of our shadow content would be related to our level of neurosis. Traits, like archetypes are biologically grounded, and express themselves within the context of the emergent conscious ego. But the content of the intrapersonal is driven by the submerged or deep self and the simultaneous desire and fear to come into true contact with it. The ego can represent the wall or the bridge to this inner deep self. Subsequent levels in this model may be viewed as the expression of this deeper with a more expansive sense of a self-system. Growth and adaptation would be measured by the consistent attainment of the ability to achieve and maintain a sense of psychological safety, in which one is safe to expand the self system. Once sufficient physical and psychological safety needs have been at least partially satisfied, Rogers and Maslow both identified that the individual actualizing tendency would be released, as people would be motivated to meet not only biological needs, but also the growth needs of the self. Once this developmental mechanism is enacted—one would seek to move towards Self-actualization, which is Inherent tendency to strive toward realization of one's full potential (expansion of the self system). But trauma and unresolved trauma can lead to lasting patterns of hyperarousal and/or dissociation, and can thwart this expression, leaving a restricted personality or self-system.

The Interpersonal Level

The Interpersonal is the family and social relationship field. Healthy Relationships are important for human development and functioning, with personal and family relationships providing many intangible healthy benefits, and feedback and identity to the self-system. When relationships are dysfunctional, individuals may be more prone to disordered behavior and/or mental disturbances. This is the level of approach in theories by Leary (1957), Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) and in parts of Horney's Theory (moving towards, away, or against people) and in family systems theory. At this level of analysis Personality development can be viewed as being influenced by family attributes and dynamics as well as attachment. Abnormal behavior is a reciprocal reflection of unhealthy family dynamics and poor communication. While this domain is manifested at the environmental level—relationships and multi-generational relational patterns can over time impact biological adaptation or maladaptation, as studies show environment can affects biochemical and brain activity, as well as structural neurological circuitry (Baltes, Reuter-Lorenz, & Rosler, 2006), and perhaps even genetic evolution over the long expanse of a multi-generational repetition compulsion.

The Exopersonal Level

The Exopersonal represents the cultural and societal aspect of the self system. This level acknowledges that human personality development arises from particular socio-cultural contexts. This level suggests that some sociocultural stressors reside within the social system – not within the person (but are expressed at other levels, including the interpersonal and intrapersonal level). This level of analysis recognizes assumptions people make vary widely across cultures—depending especially on whether the culture emphasizes individualism or collectivism. A particular sociocultural development is one factor that might lead to different brain expression/development and social learning particular to that culture (cultural relativism), with commonality on some traits and behaviors (cultural universality). Western cultures express

a very individualistic Exopersonality compared to the collectivist cultures around the world, but this may be rapidly changing towards more balanced individualistic-collectivistic global norm (Kim-Appel & Appel, 2005). It would be at the Exopersonal level that Adler's concept of social interest (Adler, 1938) could be seen as a measure of constructive personality development. Social Interest and Exopersonal development represent a higher level of interaction with the other, and includes increased group cooperation. While both the Interpersonal and the Exopersonal levels represents other-directedness, the Interpersonal represents actual immediate relationships, while the Exopersonal represents our conceptual relationships with persons and groups not known personally and our expression of altruism towards them.

The Ecopersonal Level

The Ecopersonal is the self –system that is part of the global-planetary field, which is “post-personal”. This level represents an ecological consciousness. It is how we see ourselves, our egos, in relationship to the planet and the natural world as a whole. Eco-psychology has been advanced as a new sub-discipline that studies individuals within this context. Personality and Identity development at this level would be marked by a sense and a more interconnected whole of all living processes on the planet. Our sensing and sense of self would be expanded at this level. At this level, one can see the inherent danger and paradox of the neuropsychological prime survival directive, particularly in regards to planetary survival. We may destroy the world (e.g. the environment, planetary and cultural warfare, etc.) in a misguided survival effort. From a threat-based and restrictive level of self-system functioning this makes all the sense, but from higher levels of self system organization the paradox appears. The expanded self would be able to see that planetary and human health is indeed closely connected. At the Ecopersonal level larger organizational principles and meaningful connections and patterns would be emerging as outlines of something larger than the individual self. Both Sewall (1999) and Bernnan (1999) sees as humanity as progressing through a stage of evolution where we have developed a personal self that is separate from the natural world and as result of the self-conscious ego (with culture specific differential emphasizes on independence, differences, and achievement). But at this level one can see at the beginning of the call to enter the next stage, a transpersonal shift towards recognition of the possibility of development towards a group and planetary consciousness, which is inherent within a larger framework of “unity consciousness”. Unity consciousness can be described as the ability to transcend opposites, to recognize and integrate complex relationships (going from parts to wholes), and to embrace and respect all experience and life equally and unconditionally.

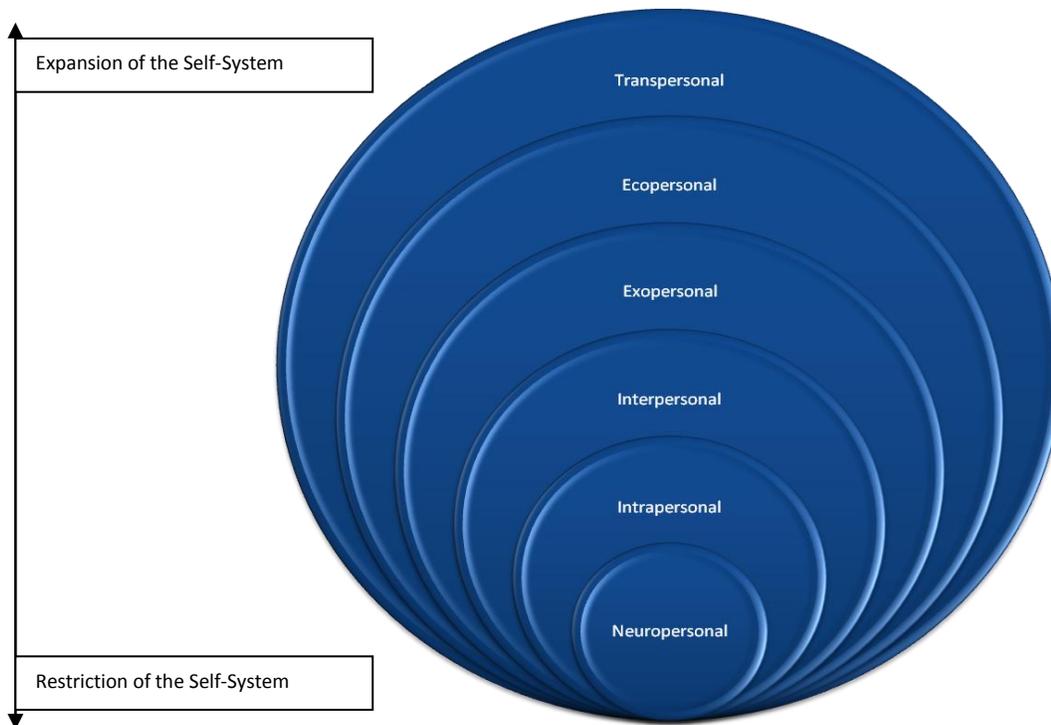
The Transpersonal Level

The Transpersonal field represents the collective unconscious and the emerging collective and unity consciousness, as well as acknowledgement of the nearly universal need for the spiritual dimension of the human psyche. This domain extends the “post-personal” and emerges into the “transrational” stages of consciousness. Reason is not excluded in this level, but is integrated with other methods of inquiry and ways of knowing. At this level one is driven towards wholeness, subject/objective unification, and the field of fundamental consciousness. The Transpersonal field in personality, if developed, represents the integration of all forms and functions of other fields, but also transcends them (without attachment). Although identity and personality exists on the plane of sense-consciousness--one can develop the ego to where it becomes like a thin line – with just sufficient individuality to retain contact with existence but also holding the larger connecting or “spiritual self” (Divyachakshus in Hindu/Sanskrit terms). This higher vantage point enables one to see one own true self, but also as psychological understanding that all part of whole unification or a “One”--manifesting itself in different forms. Although spiritual insight or glimpses of unity consciousness

can come to anyone, a healthy personality may be necessary for sustained and healthy transpersonal development. Critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, emotional expression, and affect tolerance are all skills necessary to maintain balance and functioning in the transpersonal realm. The psychological study of peak experiences (Maslow, 1970) and flow (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) examines some of the transpersonal territory and its relation to the psyche and human development, but much of the transpersonal domain remains under-examined or devalued within the field of psychology. Religious and Spiritual traditions across cultures and eras have traditionally focused on the transpersonal accepts of living, but as the human brain and our knowledge systems evolves, there may be a recognition and the need to study this transpersonal level.

Each level or domain in the MAP represents different views of Personality and development, and each has supporters who are influenced by their models. Greatest understanding comes from integrating approaches. It is all systems within systems within systems. The parts also contain the wholes (isomorphism)—see figure 1.

FIGURE 1: MAP Model



Conclusion

This paper was a beginning attempt to develop a wider lens in which to examine prior models of personality as well as future integrative models. The MAP approach to personality is also suggestive of a multi-modal practice of personality assessment and research. Typically, we have the tendency to approach the challenge of understanding and assessing our personalities and psychological functioning categorically through a narrowly focused and singular lens. But linear chains of behavioral events and mapped psychological categories are merely “snapshots” or a static view of a living process. Everything is a relationship, a dynamic, a connection, a non-linear reciprocal system. The wide-lens or multi-focused view can reveal different patterns, meanings, and implications. Whether it is research or assessment of personality we need to make sure we are doing "holistic" multi-method data collection that takes both the "objective (empirical-behavioral-external) view--as well as the "subjective" (internal-qualitative narrative) views in account. One dimensional assessment and research can be helpful, but never should be used as an inert truth. Human beings exist on multiple levels and thus should be viewed on those levels. In the future, the most influential theories and research will be those that adopt such a meta-perspective.

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