

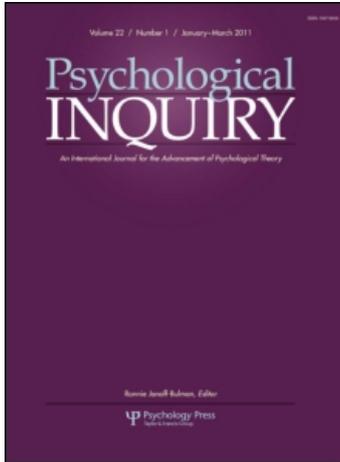
This article was downloaded by: [Univ Missouri Columbia]

On: 17 March 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 930579149]

Publisher Psychology Press

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Psychological Inquiry

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t775648164>

The Local Baby and the Global Bathwater: Circumscribed Goals for the Future of the Multilevel Personality in Context Model

Samantha J. Heintzelman^a; Laura A. King^a

^a Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri

Online publication date: 03 March 2011

To cite this Article Heintzelman, Samantha J. and King, Laura A. (2011) 'The Local Baby and the Global Bathwater: Circumscribed Goals for the Future of the Multilevel Personality in Context Model', *Psychological Inquiry*, 22: 1, 23 – 25

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/1047840X.2011.544027

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2011.544027>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The Local Baby and the Global Bathwater: Circumscribed Goals for the Future of the Multilevel Personality in Context Model

Samantha J. Heintzelman and Laura A. King

Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri

It may be a unique feature of personality psychology that every few years outstanding scholars present a new corrective vision of the field. Some scholars have argued that personality psychologists have focused on the wrong things (Carlson, 1971) or have lost sight of the appropriate outcomes (Furr, 2009). Others have presented new approaches to defining, organizing, and understanding the field of personality itself (Mayer 2005; McAdams & Pals, 2006). In a similar spirit, Sheldon, Cheng, and Hilpert (this issue) propose the ambitious Multilevel Personality in Context (MPIC) model for situating psychology and personality psychology, in particular, in a broad context. This model presents an innovative challenge and a provocative mission for personality psychology, embedded, perhaps for the first time, in the wider world of science of itself. Particularly impressive, Sheldon, Cheng, and Hilpert provide two persuasive studies of subjective well-being (SWB) that demonstrate the potential utility of the approach, effectively demonstrating that this challenge can, in fact, be met. Finally, having set forth these examples, they advocate guidelines for implementing of the approach across the field of personality.

In a word, the model is huge. In its sheer breadth, it invites comparison to the Grand Theories from psychology's past (such as psychoanalysis) that sought to explain all of human behavior. As a deliberately theory-neutral and empirically grounded approach, the MPIC model is certainly more amenable to modern personality psychologists than those historic theories. Will the field embrace these ambitious goals with the same enthusiasm as the authors? Will investigators, fully entrenched in their deep and narrow scholarly furrows, begin to forge broad connections with other disciplines and conduct research that directly serves this huge framework? New visions of personality psychology are often presented and widely cited. However, such efforts, however valiant, typically do not lead to a sea change in the field. Will the MPIC meet a similar fate? How might it have durable and substantial influence on personality psychology, beyond obligatory hand-waves in discussion sections of otherwise more garden-variety research papers?

In this commentary, we address these questions as we consider three central concerns with the model. To begin, we offer some caveats with regard to the very

expansiveness of this approach, while noting, as well, some likely determinants of behavior that are absent from the model. We then consider the applicability of the model to the study of outcomes and process variables that are not amenable to self-report. We then take up the question of the costs of adopting this global, expansive approach to our knowledge of more local phenomena. After reviewing these concerns, we conclude by suggesting two more circumscribed goals for the MPIC model, goals that we believe hold the key to the ultimate value of the approach to researchers who might balk at adopting this daunting perspective.

To anticipate our main points, we view the MPIC model as an important complement to rather than a replacement for more typical strategies. In cases where the model is implemented properly, the knowledge gained would be undoubtedly valuable to the field. However, we caution that breadth should not be gained at the expense other, equally valuable (if less expansive) research goals. In essence, we argue for a balance between the need to understand local processes and the MPIC model's global goal of creating a comprehensive science. Yes, it is important to see the forest of science beyond the specific trees of particular variables or associations. But there is still much to be learned about the trees before we leave them to consider the forest. Nevertheless, those of us who are occupied with the trees may benefit from MPIC model.

Demarcating the Science of Human Behavior: Too Much and Too Little

Sheldon, Cheng, and Hilpert describe an impressive multilevel and multidisciplinary framework for studying behavior, suggesting that components of a number of fields should be considered as potential behavioral determinants and studied as such. Although the model nicely represents the hierarchical interactions between several established components of human functioning, it also lacks a sound argument for the inclusion of certain relationships within the model. We suggest eliminating the direct causal arrows, seen in Figure 1 (this issue, p. 2), between the lower order levels of analysis and behavior. Behavior is not independently or directly caused by atomic, molecular, or cellular factors in the

absence of a higher order determinant serving as a co-contributor. The absence of these levels of analysis as independent influences on behavior is reflected in the observation that scientists in the areas associated with the lower levels of this model are not pursuing the goal of understanding behavior, at least not behavior as it is typically defined. Chemists and molecular biologists might be quite surprised to hear that they study human behavior.

The influence of these fields on *behavior* is captured, instead, in the ways these lower levels interact with (and are mediated through) the higher levels included in the model, perhaps most importantly as they function in the brain. The science of human behavior is psychology. Surely, the physical body is important to behavior. But the atoms, molecules, or cells that compose a person's hand, do not determine whether, when, and for whom that hand is offered in comfort or raised in anger. Understanding these sublevel properties does not disambiguate behavior in the absence of understanding the psychological (and perhaps neuropsychological) processes that underlie that behavior.

Although we have argued for trimming back some aspects of this model of human behavior, we also note that, despite its expansiveness, the model misses a critical element in understanding human behavior, the physical environment. The person is embedded not only in a social system but also in a physical one. That physical system includes not only people but objects, places, climates, and events that all play a role in behavior. Culture itself is intimately tied to the physical reality of geography. Neighborhoods and houses are not simply metaphors they are physical realities and have a role to play in understanding human behavior. Put another way, stimuli happen. Further, stimuli can influence behavior even in the absence of subjective perception. Whether it is on the macrolevel of physical events (such as natural disasters) or the microlevel of situations (such as in a research lab), incorporating the physical context into the model would help to illuminate the ways this approach balances the influence of person variables and (not just social) contextual variables in the prediction of behavior.

Personality and Behavior: The Limits of Self-Report

Following their description of this multidimensional model for the study of behavior in general, the authors shift to propose a similarly wide-spanning model specific to the study of personality. They propose a six-level structure, the MPIC model, suggesting that personality researchers should inclusively consider (and measure) need satisfaction, traits and dispositions, goals and motives, sense of self, social relations, and culture in their work. The use of this thought-provoking

and ambitious comprehensive model of personality is exemplified with two impressive and laborious studies of SWB.

Although these studies demonstrate the valuable breadth of knowledge that can be gained when using the MPIC model, they do so relying almost exclusively on self-report methods (with culture being the sole exception). The selection of SWB as the outcome of interest may be serendipitous given that SWB lends itself to self-report measurements. Given the acknowledged difficulty in applying the MPIC even to variables that are readily measured using self-report, one wonders if applying the MPIC model to studies of actual behavior is logistically feasible. Further, there are variables that might play a causal role, even in well-being, that are not available to conscious reflection. How might the MPIC model be applied to such outcomes and variables?

Obviously, such implementation might be possible but horrifyingly difficult. Nevertheless, Sheldon, Cheng, and Hilpert might argue, just because it is difficult does not mean it is not the optimal strategy for the advancement of science. Shall we all just hunker down and take on the challenge of cross-cultural research predicting observed behaviors from traits, self-variables, motives, goals, social relations, universal needs (and nonconscious processes) and get over it? More to our point, *should we, even if we could?* Here we turn to our main concern with regard to the MPIC approach as a kind of "best practices" for personality psychology. The MPIC model is daunting, but its sheer dauntingness is not the only reason some researchers may not ditch their "deep and narrow" scholarly furrows for MPIC-inspired investigations.

The Challenge and Value of Local Research

Sheldon, Cheng, and Hilpert advocate that the MPIC approach be utilized throughout the field, describing the approach as "essential for scientific advancement." Although briefly acknowledging a few potential obstacles, such as funding difficulties and the arduous nature of such endeavors, the driving message is that these obstacles are not insurmountable. In a sense, legitimate problems and disadvantages of such an approach are passed off as inconveniences that should be overcome by truly committed scientists. Those overwhelmed by such a complex strategy would seem to be relegated to, essentially, less meaningful research.

An important pitfall of adopting the expansive MPIC model approach is the likelihood that engaging in this type of research might lead us to lose sight of important local and specific processes that are central to personality functioning in context. The critical question becomes, Is research aimed toward understanding something more broadly, in fact, inherently superior

to work devoted building the foundation of knowledge within each level of analysis?

The blanket call for personality researchers to begin conducting work following the MPIC model, although superficially appealing, may come at the expense of knowledge about local processes. Arguably, embedded in each level of the MPIC model is a smaller world comprising equally complex hierarchically organized processes. Illuminating these processes within each level is, itself, a daunting challenge. Indeed, research understanding a subcomponent within a particular level may ultimately be a sufficient goal for an entire scholarly career. Furthermore, understanding those local, circumscribed processes is not only a valid goal for science but also essential to engaging in the kind of global research called for in the MPIC model.

The MPIC model sets forth a research agenda that requires foundational knowledge at each of its constituent levels. Thus, research that occurs within a comparatively narrow boundary may be essential to the eventual achievement of the MPIC model goals. In a sense, our point is that, on many fronts, we are not yet ready to move from local processes to this more global perspective. We simply do not know enough about the constituent elements to adopt a more global approach, as a general rule. The local baby ought not to be discarded, overlooked, or even drowned in the global bathwater.

Nevertheless, the MPIC model does inspire us to consider some ways that local researchers can begin to look up from their small worlds to the larger context advocated by Sheldon, Cheng, and Hilpert. The model promises to help situate more local research in a particular level and may inform the map that accrues around topics at each level. We close with a consideration of this more modest agenda, inspired by the MPIC model.

Embedding Local Research in a Global Context: The Unique Promise of the MPIC Model

The MPIC model has important implications for future research on local phenomena to the extent that it helps inform two empirical goals. Each of these goals involves vigorously pursuing and empirically nailing down the borders of the levels in the MPIC model. The first goal is identifying *the proximity* of levels of analysis. If these borders were well specified and empirically supported, researchers would face a different and perhaps less daunting challenge. Specifically, identifying truly adjacent levels of analysis would allow researchers to include not the entire model but, perhaps, variables from one level up or down to begin branching out. Sheldon, Cheng, and Hilpert present data demonstrating the ways that this can work in their analysis of the influence of culture on self-variables. Research that examines the borders of levels could also address

the question of whether this hierarchical structure of influence remains intact over differing outcomes.

The second goal involves identifying *the direction* of influence from one level to another. Sheldon, Cheng, and Hilpert perhaps hedge their bets in this regard, preferring bidirectional arrows between each level. It might be the case some of these arrows are, in fact, one-way streets, and identifying these (as well as the nature and temporal dynamics of reciprocal associations) would, again, allow researchers to make predictions about the relations among the two or three levels they have chosen to include in their studies.

Thus, research that fully plumbed the boundaries between levels, demonstrating the validity of the structure proposed in the MPIC model as well as the direction of effects between levels would provide personality psychologists with a less daunting but valuable road map from which to broaden their research questions. These new questions and this new research might not represent the MPIC model in its fullest form but might well “advance science” in the long term, in small bites.

Closing Thoughts

Like others before them, Sheldon, Cheng, and Hilpert present a thought-provoking model with the promise to revolutionize the field of personality psychology. We opened this commentary with the question of whether this new approach would indeed lead to a sea change in the field. Our assessment of the approach leads us to conclude that a sea change may not be necessary—either to the field or to demonstrate the success of this approach. Instead, a more modest adjustment of the aspirations of personality psychology may be in order. The MPIC model has the promise of providing a roadmap for this adjustment, so that when researchers do look up from their narrow furrows they will know where to look.

Note

Address correspondence to Laura A. King, Department of Psychological Sciences, McAlester Hall, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211-2500. E-mail: kingla@missouri.edu

References

- Carlson, R. (1971). Where's the person in personality research? *Psychological Bulletin*, *75*, 203–219.
- Furr, R. M. (2009). Personality psychology as a truly behavioural science. *European Journal of Personality*, *23*, 369–401.
- Mayer, J. D. (2005). A tale of two visions: Can a new view of personality help integrate psychology? *American Psychologist*, *60*, 294–307.
- McAdams, D. P., & Pals, J. L. (2006). A new big five: Fundamental principles for an integrative science of personality. *American Psychologist*, *61*, 204–217.