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*This article provides commentary on the following target article:*

Durbin, C. Emily, and Brian M. Hicks. "Personality and psychopathology: A stagnant field in need of development." *European Journal of Personality* 28.4 (2014): 362-386.

### **Stirring Up the Personality and Psychopathology Pond**

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### Abstract

Durbin and Hicks offer stringent criticism of the state of the science relating personality and psychopathology and argue that significant changes are needed. They suggest that adopting a developmental focus will provide the necessary movement in an otherwise “stagnant” field. On the whole I take their message to be a call for more mechanistic research in this area. I agree that investing in research designs that leverage time in order to elucidate mechanistic processes is a worthwhile venture. However, developmental designs are only one of many likely fruitful avenues.

### **Stirring Up the Personality and Psychopathology Pond**

Durbin and Hicks offer a thought provoking critique of the state of the science investigating the interface of personality and psychopathology, and are ambitious in their suggestion that developmentally informed research designs might resolve many of the longstanding issues in the field. In the most general sense, I take their call as one for more mechanistic research, which they argue is best achieved through the study of processes as they unfold over time. Accordingly, their choice of the word stagnant, although strong, is perhaps appropriate, evoking the still waters of a pool that is in need of movement. Beyond approving of their metaphorical title, I support their call for more mechanistic research, and agree that by using study designs that leverage time we can uncover processes, which are the currents that can take us to mechanisms.

In my opinion, the most compelling aspect of this proposal is the emphases on personality as a dynamic phenomenon that is necessarily contextualized in its expression. Durbin and Hicks suggest a number of interesting hypotheses about potential mechanisms (i.e., *processes*) associated with deviations from normative personality development at particular epochs (i.e., *context*). For instance, that facing a developmental challenge and being underprepared may demoralize, evoke unfavorable comparisons to one's peers, or otherwise lead to maladaptive or disordered self-regulation is an interesting notion worthy of detailed inquiry.

In spite of my general enthusiasm for this piece, I felt that there was room for expanding upon Durbin and Hicks' treatment of the difference between "traits" and "disorders." As I see it, this distinction is fundamental, and how it is conceptualized will necessarily constrain study design and conclusions. I would agree with Durbin and Hicks' suggestion that we should draw distinctions between normative and disordered functioning. In many respects this is a necessary corollary of their proposal, but this is much easier said than done for a variety of reasons. For one, disorders, at least as defined in the diagnostic nomenclature, have generally

been shown to be dimensional in nature (e.g., Eysenk, 1955; Wright, Krueger, et al., 2013). Thus, the way disorders and their symptoms are currently defined does not support a clear distinction between disordered and non-disordered. This fact poses a problem for the type of research design used as the empirical exemplar, in that by using categorical cutoffs, error was necessarily introduced in to the system and the plotted trajectories reflect points along what are otherwise likely to be graded continua of change. Note that by adopting a view of psychopathology as dimensional, it does not require that it is linearly continuous with normal processes in the same domain(s) of functioning (e.g., depression involves affective functioning, just as Neuroticism and Extraversion do). However maintaining the distinction between normality and pathology becomes excruciatingly difficult when one recognizes that cross-sectionally assessed symptoms are just as dimensional as traits.

This difficulty has been highlighted in a number of psychometrically sophisticated studies, including one co-authored by Hicks. Specifically, when techniques like item response theory are used to examine whether trait and disorder questionnaires fall along the same continuum, they not only do so, but with few exceptions they provide mostly overlapping information (e.g., Samuel et al., 2010; Walton et al., 2008). Psychometrically, this is problematic for disentangling traits and disorder (even when using longitudinal models), in spite of the fact that conceptually this is a compelling (and possibly necessary) distinction. The question becomes, how can normative and pathological behavior be cleanly distinguished?

I would argue that the authors' notions of personality as dynamic and contextualized provide the answer to this vexing question. Durbin and Hicks rightly argue that personality not only shows intraindividual change over the course of years (and importantly, interindividual differences in this change), which might be understood as macro-level change, but trait relevant behavior exhibits dynamic properties at the micro-level, on the order of days (e.g., Brown & Moskowitz, 1998) and moments (e.g., Fleeson, 2001), and at the meso-level, on the order of weeks to months (e.g., Wright, Hallquist, et al., 2013). Taking the demonstration of variability as

prima facie evidence of processes unfolding over various time-scales, adding in context can provide what is needed in order to fully characterize maladaptivity. As Sullivan stated, “We all show everything that any mental patient shows, except for the pattern, the accents, and so on.” (1954, p. 183), which is to say that differentiating normality from abnormality, separate from the location on any hypothetical latent dimension or spectrum, involves an articulation of the processes and contexts in which behavior occurs that makes it maladaptive. For example, anxiety is a normative experience, daily anxiety may even be normative, but anxiety that lasts hours and is uncontrollable, or that is non-contingent on threats and challenges from the environment is not.

However, systematically measuring what might be construed as “normative process” and a “disordered process” is something we do quite poorly with current cross-sectional methods. When pathology is measured with extreme items, like diagnostic criteria, what results is a continuous but skewed distribution (i.e., a half-Gaussian curve), when finer-grained measures are used (e.g., multi-item polytomous inventories) the distributions remain highly overlapping. To get around this challenging state, we need to augment current techniques with measurement designs that are capable of precisely capturing the hypothetical processes on the time scale that they are thought to occur (Collins, 2006). Importantly this suggestion is not at odds or mutually exclusive with Durbin and Hicks’ focus on development, and measurement burst designs can be employed (Sliwinski, 2008).

In sum, this commentary is not intended to detract from Durbin and Hicks’ proposal, rather it is meant to enhance it and suggest that costly developmental studies are best conducted with measurement that might distinguish normative and pathological processes per se. Short-term studies focusing on differentiating processes are also needed. My suggestions are necessarily abstract and the challenge is designing studies that faithfully match theory and method. Ultimately, I agree that there is room for advancing the study of personality and psychopathology, as there always is in any science.

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