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The interpersonal nexus of persons, situations, and psychopathology

Aaron L. Pincus *, Mark R. Lukowitsky, Aidan G.C. Wright, Wendy C. Eichler

The Pennsylvania State University, Psychology, 542 Moore Bldg, University Park, PA 16802, United States

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Advances in personality consistency and person–situation integration hold immense promise to forge a more unified psychological science, including greater synthesis of personality, social, and clinical psychology. The two goals of this essay are to highlight that (a) this emerging integration is capable of providing new approaches to describing and understanding psychopathology that are consistent with the common observation of fluctuating symptomology, and (b) the interpersonal theory of personality and its associated circumplex models of behavior, traits, and motives provides a nexus for coherently organizing such investigations of clinical phenomena.

Some diagnoses, such as trichotillomania, imply rather classic conceptions of cross-situational consistency—chronic hair pulling without significant situational contingencies. The prominent features of others, such as bipolar disorder, are best characterized by variability in mood and behavior over time. Finally, many diagnostic features are actually based on implicit or explicit if-then behavioral signatures. For example, a cardinal symptom of borderline personality disorder could be phrased as, “if the person perceives abandonment, then frantic efforts to avoid it are enacted.” Defining symptoms of social phobia could be phrased as, “if the person perceives scrutiny, dislike, or disapproval from others, then anxiety is experienced and avoidance behaviors are enacted.”

A key implication of situation–behavior contingencies is the need to identify the psychologically salient features of situations, and this requires an organizing psychological theory. Consistent with our analysis of many if-then diagnostic features of psychopathology, recent work in personality, social, and clinical psychology converges in emphasizing the salience of interpersonal features of situations (Fournier, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2008; Pincus, Lukowitsky, & Wright, in press; Reis, 2008). We suggest that the interpersonal theory of personality and its circumplex models based on agentic and communal constructs is a promising framework for person–situation integration for a number of reasons. First, it provides a system to describe interpersonal behaviors (i.e., ACME States; Fleeson & Noftle, 2008) and interpersonal situations using a common metric. Second, empirical research confirms the normative behavioral contingencies of interpersonal situations described by the principles of interpersonal complementarity, supporting the proposition that chronic deviations from complementarity may indicate the presence of psychopathology. And third, by proposing that a focal question for the study of psychopathology is “Why do individuals stray from the conventions of dyadic interaction?”, the framework points to multiple possible sources of disturbed interpersonal functioning (e.g., distortions in interpersonal perception and meaning making processes; maladaptive, underdeveloped, or overvalued interpersonal goals, motives, expectancies, beliefs, and competencies).

Pathological behavioral signatures often reflect coping behaviors (thens) activated by distorted perceptions of interpersonal situations (ifs). Problems arise because behaviors are enacted based on characteristic misinterpretations of the agentic and communal aspects of situations that are inconsistent with others’ perceptions and intentions. The paranoid person misinterprets a broad array of interpersonal situations as malevolent (if), responding with self-protective hostile-dominance (then). In new interpersonal situations this violates normative interpersonal patterns, and ultimately leads to self-fulfilling prophecies and disturbed interpersonal relations. Incorporating contemporary perspectives on consistency, variability and person–situation integration provides a strong foundation for advancing the study of psychopathology.
References


