Microgenesis in Making Sense of Oneself:
Constructive Recycling of Personality Inventory Items

Rainer Diriwächter, Jaan Valsiner & Christine Sauck

Abstract: Qualitative orientation in the social sciences is not a new trend, but a realistic restoration of method construction that fits the quality of the phenomena under study with the data it derives. Many existing methods are available for intellectual recycling—de-quantification and re-use of the original items in new functions. We outline a productive use of classical standardized methods of personality research through their systematic de-quantification. The result is a new use of its raw items as meaning-making triggers in the study of the qualitative process of self-reflection. We demonstrate how a qualitative use of selected NEO-PI-R items makes it possible to investigate the specific ways in which individuals conceptualize their specific characteristics, attempting to arrive at a closure about their fit with one's self as a whole. The processes of meaning-making involved in such closure are holistic in nature. The developmental traditions of *Ganzheitspsychologie*—the use of techniques of microgenesis (*Aktualgenese*)—are outlined as returning to the focus of interest of qualitative research practices.

Table of Contents

1. Intellectual Recycling of Ideas: What Can One Do With Quantified Methods?

It has become a long-standing tradition within the mainstream field of psychology to accept the quantitative orientation as the "gold standard" of science. Yet quantification merely restores the basic balance to research methodology (BRANCO & VALSINER, 1997; VALSINER, 2000a). There is no automatic preference to be given either to quantitative or qualitative methods in a wider cycle of methodology. Instead, all data—qualitative and quantitative alike—are signs that represent complex, structured, and fluid realities of the psychological processes (VALSINER, 2000b). Quantification's emergence as the preferred way to collect, process, and analyze data is an artificial result of the social history of our disciplines (DANZIGER, 1990; 1997; HORNSTEIN, 1988). [1]

As a result of psychology's eclecticism of methods, there are many developed quantitative methods that have lost their usefulness in generating basic knowledge for science. The mere application of such methods is not sufficient since applied research concerns cannot determine the progress in basic knowledge. Quantitative methods can be intellectually recycled—old materials re-thought, re-oriented, and put to new uses. For example, a method that has been set up to generate data on the outcomes of some psychological processes (e.g., rating scales—WAGONER & VALSINER, 2003; ROSENBAUM & VALSINER, 2004) can be re-formatted to allow access to these processes and begin to create new kinds of data. [2]

In this paper, we continue to demonstrate how that task can be done. In an earlier example (VALSINER, DIRIWÄCHTER & SAUCK, in press) we showed how the classic method of theory-free psychology—the MMPI—could be recycled to begin rendering new kinds of data. Here we take this analysis one step further and look at the meanings of ambiguous responses ("hard to say") to personality inventory items. [3]

2. Personality Psychology: Contrasting Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches

Personality psychology is an example of a sub-field in psychology in which the construction of quantified inventories has proliferated widely since the 1930s. In recent years, the areas have been involved in a consolidation process where one of the very many personality questionnaires—NEO-PI (DIGMAN, 1990)—is establishing its monopoly among many others. [4]

Being itself a conglomerate of different personality questionnaires as well as of common language use (JOHN, 1990), NEO-PI is famous for its generality. There exist claims that the five factors extracted in the empirical studies—Neuroticism (N), Extraversion (E), Openness to Experience (O), Agreeableness (A) and Conscientiousness (C)—constitute transcultural universals of personality (McCRAE, 2002). Such claims have been questioned as developing fads in psychology (BLOCK, 1995a, 1995b), yet the uses of NEO-PI and the

corresponding discourses about it have proliferated. It seems that the whole area of personality psychology has become colonized by a focus on looking at inter-individual differences, their classifications, and statistical predictions based on such differences. [5]

The extreme quantificational emphasis of contemporary personality psychology is an ironic outcome of the history of the past five decades of psychology. In 1944, RAYMOND CATTELL warned his fellow psychologists against mixing up the substantive issues in the science (e.g., "what is interest?") with the ease of translating it into an empirical question within inter-individual reference frame (e.g., "how can different people be ranked *vis-à-vis* one another in their interests"—CATTELL, 1944, p.300). Contemporary psychology at large has lost its ability to access complex, holistic phenomena due to its unconditional quantification of research methods (VALSINER & DIRIWÄCHTER, in press). It is a major limitation for contemporary psychological science, guaranteeing its uneven progression since the beginning of the 20th century (VALSINER, 2003a). More specifically, the sophistication of personological work of William STERN and Gordon ALLPORT has been lost in recent years (VALSINER, 1998). In short— the field of personality research is drifting away from its object of investigation, replacing the issue itself with alienated discourse in the use of quantitative methods. [6]

3. Goals of the Qualitative Focus on Personality

Our goal in this paper is to take an alternative path to the current quantitative methods in practice. We are interested in how personality is organized through the person's self-reflexive meaning-making processes. Hence our approach is idiographic and qualitative. We utilize the relatively forgotten methodological traditions of *Aktualgenese* (microgenesis) and apply those to the ways in which individuals are observed in their efforts to understand themselves. The material we use to trigger these processes has been borrowed from the quantified approaches to studying personality (i.e. NEO-PI items), but what we do with the data created through the use of these items differs cardinally from the usual personality research method. Our effort is similar to that of Jean PIAGET, who, when commissioned to standardize British intelligence tests for French schoolchildren in a Paris suburb in 1919, turned the items of the tests into specific cognitive probes (PIAGET, 1922). [7]

Turning quantitative test items into cognitive probes ultimately leads to single-case qualitative scenarios. Hence, before we examine the actual meaning-making process, we would first like to devote some thoughts to the question of "how it is possible to generalize from single-case qualitative data?" Figure 1 charts out two different trajectories of generalization (for a wider coverage, see VALSINER, 2003b). It is important to bear in mind that both qualitative and quantitative orientations to generalization are equifinal in their intellectual objectives. They only reach that equifinality point through two very different intellectual routes.
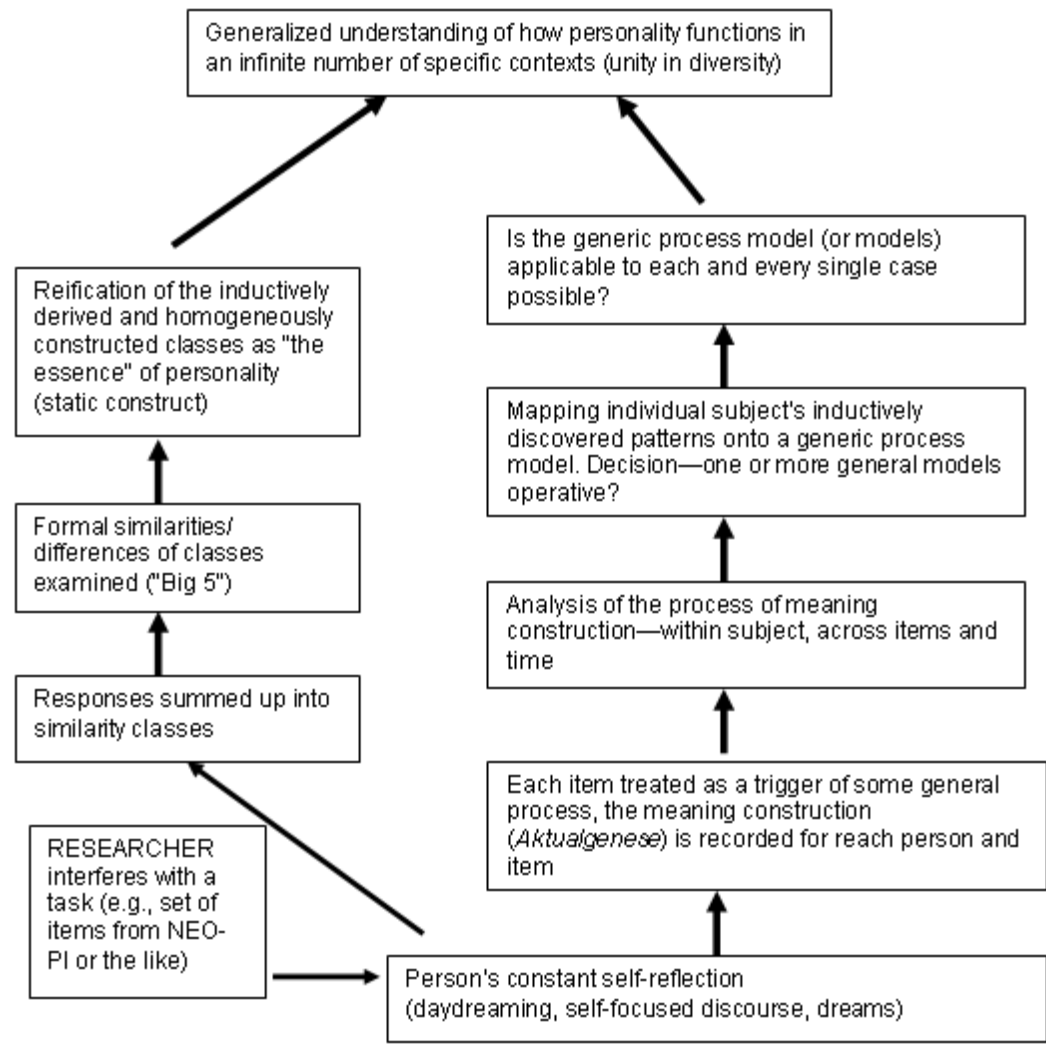
Figure 1: Pathways to generalization [8]

Generalization of any knowledge involves abstraction — thus all scientific knowledge is abstract:

> "... to generalize is to recognize likeness which had previously been masked by differences; to recognize the likeness is also therefore to recognize these differences as irrelevant, and to *disregard them from the point of view of the general conception*." (DICTIONARY OF PHILOSOPHY AND PSYCHOLOGY, 1901, p.408, emphases added) [9]

The crucial feature of this generalization is the "seeing the forest behind the trees"—while recognizing the uniqueness of each specimen, using the differences between the specimens to identify/explore the commonality of all of them. These commonalities can generally be identified in two ways—categorically or functionally. In the case of categorical generalization, the inter-individual variability is "pushed" to disappear through the act of devising homogeneous classes (i.e., capitalizing upon the differences *between* classes) and

simultaneously overlooking that very same variability within each of the classes (*homogenization* of each constructed class). The set of such homogenized classes is then believed to represent "the population." This is precisely the way in which quantified personality research (i.e., NEO-PI) has proceeded. [10]

In contrast, the functional commonality is discovered through demonstration that vastly different structural forms of personality have similar functions (*unitas multiplex* as emphasized by STERN, 1911). Here the focus is upon procedural variability that all reflects the universality of person-environment relating. Generalization here occurs by comparing the data on processes of attempting to create meaning when confronted with an ambiguous social suggestion. In that process, both the internalized and personally reconstructed wider social representations (*langue* in terms of Ferdinand de SAUSSURE—see VALSINER, 1998, pp.254-259) are utilized to make sense of the self in a here-and-now encounter that requires such meaning construction. *Aktualgenese* of that kind is the analogue to De SAUSSURE's parole notion. A small episode in everyday life —or the wording of an item in a test—may trigger complex, possibly escalating, and lengthy intra-personal dialogues. For instance, a request to indicate "support" or "disagreement" (ADORNO et al., 1950, p.111) with a statement like the following: "Filipinos are all right in their place, but they carry it too far when they dress lavishly, buy good cars, and go around with white girls." [11]

What does such an item (here—an example borrowed from the Ethnocentrism Scale, see ADORNO et al, p.111) trigger in the respondent? On the one hand, it plays up a set of everyday life scenarios with which anybody is familiar—lavishly dressed people, boys going around with girls, driving around in cars, etc. These triggered possible real-life scenarios are mapped on the social representing of one's in-group in relation to the out-group, its evaluation, and—conditional mapping of the socially represented groups onto everyday activities. This is the total stimulus field evoked by the sentence. As such, the field of meanings of one item becomes loosely connected with those of another—for instance "The many political parties tend to confuse national issues, add to the expense of the elections, and raise unnecessary agitation. For this and other reasons, it would be best if all political parties except the two major ones be abolished" (ADORNO et al, 1950, p.110). Here the manifest topic is quite different from lavishly dressed boys and girls and luxury cars—yet the way in which the meanings field becomes organized is similar. Categorical intolerance of some state of affairs that is presented within the field is what is looked for in the person's responses. [12]

Thus, the function of an item in the personality inventory is to trigger the personal-cultural reconstruction of the depicted scenario in one's intra-psychological domain, and elicitation of the affectively over-determined response to this interpreted structure of the field. The holistic field becomes defined by way of these responses—immediate endorsement or denial (monologization of the field), or a dialogue within the self of how to reconcile the episodes of imagery (or memory) with the suggestion for evaluative group difference. It is that evaluative marking—and its fixity—that the tasks of responding to personality inventory items actually elicit. [13]

4. Standardized Personality Questionnaires: Accumulation of Outcomes

Existing personality questionnaires are clearly oriented toward the detection of well-formed (automatized, decontextualized, and abbreviated) outcomes of the meaning construction processes. Personality research methods that ask individuals to answer questions about themselves and write or type the answers on some medium (such as paper or computer keyboard) are recording such outcomes, yet are unable to grasp the uncertainty in the respondent's answers. Thus personality investigated by such methods needs to be defined as a set of generalized descriptive characteristics—precisely what happens in case of NEO-PI discourse. [14]

The use of outcomes-oriented personality inventories is based on a number of basic assumptions:

4.1 Assumption 1: Local independence of test items

Standard questionnaires—like other psychological tests—are built on the assumption that the respondent's answers to different items in a test are statistically independent—answering an item X in a certain way does not have an impact on any of the items from X to final item N of the questionnaire. This assumption may be difficult to satisfy in the case of personality questionnaire items that "pull for" a person's self-narrative disclosure that has continuity over time (and sequence of questions). [15]

4.2 Assumption 2: Minimization of response process is a goal

This assumption is built into any standard method where subjects are instructed to respond as quickly as possible, or on the basis of their first impression. In the case of a person's confrontation with any psychological test—especially personality questionnaire—the fictional and real meanings of the terms brought into the situation by the researcher's formulating a single item become related with the read-out from the person's present interpretation of the situation, and of one's past life story. A personality test item touches upon the depth of private experience (see SINGER & BONNANO, 1990)—yet in ways that are minimized by the constructors of the test. [16]

Minimization is given by the constraining of the response format: any step away from "free reply" (unbounded narrative)—such as sentence completion, rating scale, "true"/"false" (or "yes"/"no") forced choice—entails some version of minimization of the contact of the researcher's message and that of the respondent. Such minimization is not an oversight (or "error")—it is a purposeful filter that allows the researcher to focus one's attention upon selected aspects of the issues under study. Yet each step in this method construction process— deciding upon the phrasing of a questionnaire item, and deciding upon the answer format—necessarily limit the access to the phenomena. [17]

4.3 Assumption 3: The (maximal) reality behind minimized responding

It is assumed that quick and immediate responding to an item can reflect the respondent's "true state" more adequately than a lengthy process of meaning construction. [18]

Assumption 3 is perhaps the most vulnerable basis for personality study. It forces the researcher to accept the stated self-statement as given—if a person once gives a general answer in categorical terms, the whole reality behind that response is encoded into it. This forces upon the respondent the notion of preference--equaling truth—in contrast with the prevailing lengthy processes of reaching uncertain answers to life's complex problems (see PENG & NISBETT, 1999). [19]

Any decision to use the minimal "forced choice" response format ("true"/"false," "yes"/"no") eliminates any access to the respondent's uncertainty in the responding process. That uncertainty cannot be reconstructed from data analyses later on—any uncertainty data surfacing from the aggregated responses (for the same person) cannot represent the uncertainty that was there in the responding process. There may be another kind of uncertainty present in the data at the aggregate level, but it does not represent the uncertainties that were functional in the making of the outcomes. [20]

Furthermore, the set-up of forced-choice response formats hides one part of psychological phenomena. Heinz WERNER, who adopted William STERN's personological stance, recognized this in his homage to STERN:

> "The person is not only a gestalt, but a *non-gestalt* as well. Vagueness, non-gestalt, equivocality are not to be evaluated in any negative sense. They are a positive characteristic of the person. Equivocality and vagueness constitute a fundamental condition, a field of potentiality, to be realized in the future. Person is not only defined according to what it is now in its present state of being, but also according to what it would become in the future." (WERNER, 1938, p.113) [21]

5. In a Different Voice: *Ganzheitspsychologie* on Personality Triggered by Test Items

WERNER represented the Central-European tradition in psychology. From this perspective, reducing a person into elements would distort the actuality of a person. We cannot strip away a person's history, his/her feelings, and expect to understand him/her on the basis of several isolated basic denominators—such as isolated personality traits (i.e. introversion/extroversion). Instead of being separate, personality characteristics act together within a dynamic whole. [22]

Every basic thought system is based on a root phenomenon—and the German tradition was no exception. Music was to a large extent the basis for holistic thinking of German philosophers and psychologists in the 1890s. Musical phenomena entail variability within similarity—a tone sequence of a certain

melody can be elevated, but still maintain the qualitative nature of the melody. EHRENFELS' (1890) term "*Gestaltqualität*" (form-quality) pertains to the fact that there is an "over-summative" (*Übersummenhaftigkeit*) component to our psychological experiences that are not explainable on the basis of the elements alone. A sound is more than just the sum of its tone-components. The melting of the components (i.e. individual tones) into a unit transforms them into something that is experientially novel and different from its elements. Furthermore, in our experiences we are never fully aware of immediate (i.e. moment-to-moment) developments. An experience is only meaningful as a momentary whole, which however is developmentally linked and integrated into a far greater totality (*Ganzheit*)—which has extension both in space and in time. This principle does not only apply to a person's isolated experience, but to the entire person as such. The paradigm of *Ganzheitspsychologie* includes all research programs whose units of measurement lie within totalities that cannot be reduced to their elements (WELLEK, 1950). [23]

Every quantitative measurement implies that there is indeed something to be measured through some kind of scale. However, we know that "same" scale ratings do not necessarily imply "sameness." For example, the answers of a 12-year-old and a 22-year-old completing identical questionnaires, measured along a particular scale, cannot render the same inferences about both individuals. Thus, any scale is context specific, and tailored to a particular group of people to which its measurement is applicable. [24]

SANDER (1962, p.374) reminds us of an important sentence by GOETHE, "Measurement and numbers in their nakedness dissolve and ban the living spirit of observation." The nature of scales, such as those that measure "personality" (e.g. the dimensions introversion/extroversion), allow for nothing more than that which is measurable, that is, one cannot imagine anything beyond that which goes through the co-variation. According to the quantitative approach (e.g. factor analysis), a personality is a finite whole, which can be determined through an exact number of parts. Individual people differ in the number of these parts out of which they consist. The more same parts people possess, the more similar these people are. This portrays a mosaic of elements, independent of what lies outside the person, through a reflex-like system that constructs a finite whole. [25]

However, with its beginnings found in WUNDT's creative synthesis (see DIRIWÄCHTER, 2003, 2004), and EHRENFELS over-summative character (see above), psychologists have also become aware of the notion of the whole consisting of complex qualities. That is, qualities not reducible to static elements are meaningless when they stand on their own. Thus, with the advent of the second school of Leipzig around 1917, that of Genetic *Ganzheitspsychologie*, a new psychology began to emerge in which the primacy of the elements (which combine to secondary structure of the experiential reality) was replaced with the teaching of the primacy of the whole in regard to phenomenological, functional, and genetical point of view. [26]

Ganzheitspsychologie operated in terms of the theoretical notions of *complexes* of different kinds (DIRIWÄCHTER, 2003, in press). There are partial complexes (*Teilkomplexe*), forms (*Gestalten*), relationships (*Bezogenheiten*), structural organization, etc. which are embedded in the totality of experience, depending on the circumstances in sub-totalities (*Teilganze*), but without exception in a totality. When we think of feelings or structure we must always see them as a connected dispositional whole that can be analyzed in terms of organization and comparisons (such as oppositional dimensions) to previous experiences. The descriptive nature of the experience allows for verifiability. [27]

Implicit in the main points of *Ganzheitspsychologie* is that the human personality is an interwoven whole. How can we understand personality or a person's experience if we do not take the entire structure into account? This structure reaches beyond the individual person as he/she is always integrated in a community, which in return is integrated in a civilization, and so forth. Not to recognize the entirety of a structure would be to neglect the rich history that undoubtedly guides our value system, our thoughts and feelings. Our historical past and being integrated into a greater whole can hardly be quantified, rather must be qualitatively described. [28]

Felix KRUEGER—Wilhelm WUNDT'S successor in Leipzig—spearheaded the *Ganzheits*-movement, and outlined the core of the *Ganzheitspsychologie*'s analytical process. In order to proceed with any form of human analysis, we must be aware of the following differentiable aspects of analysis that must be kept separate (KRUEGER, 1915, pp.75-80):

1. *The analysis of components*: where components refers to the non-reducible parts of a totality, which are necessarily totalities of their own. These sub-totalities are standing in relation to each other and cannot be fully segregated from one another or from the greater totality without losing their meaning.
2. *The analysis of conditions*: this second approach, which is always conceptually abstract, goes beyond the immediate experience, rising analytically over everything that was ever a part of a single psychological experience and could ever be held in its components. Conditions are always conceptualized and empirical conditions, which as we know all science seeks, are abstracted from compared events of the past, which are terminologically abstracted in and of themselves, that is, they are bound to the limitations that our language allows for interpretation. [29]

The latter also describes causes. Causal analysis is only a specific case of the analysis of conditions. This is based on the idea that from comparing past and present events, we can more or less establish laws by which these events happen, with the expectations that these laws will apply in the future as well. But since there is always a chance that these laws contain faults, all analyses of conditions are more or less hypothetical. Personal experiences can only be seen from the perspective of the person, both qualitative as well as in terms of functionality. [30]

6. A Sidewise Look at NEO-PI

Despite all the vigorous disputes, the five-factor solution to personality is created in the abstracted domain of sieving through response outcomes—answers to the items of the questionnaire—rather than concentrated on the answering processes. For example, consider the cluster of items from NEOPI-R that are considered together under A (Agreeableness) dimension, under the group labeled Trust (COSTA & MCCRAE, 1998):

> I tend to be cynical and skeptical of others' intentions
>
> I believe that most people are basically well-intentioned
>
> I believe that most people will take advantage of you if you let them.
>
> I think most of the people I deal with are honest and trustworthy.
>
> I am suspicious when someone does something nice for me.
>
> My first reaction is to trust people.
>
> I tend to assume the best about people
>
> I have a good deal of faith in human nature [31]

The emphases are added to indicate where the vagueness of the communicative messages (of the researcher) is encoded. Note the reliance on the "majority rule" ("most people"), and the fuzzy qualifiers ("basically," "good deal of"). It is only by our everyday life meta-contract between the solicitor and the respondent that these questions are understood and easily answered. If the truth value of the answers is to be queried in-depth, these questions would probably never be answered by anyone—at least not quickly. [32]

By the meta-contract of communication, the respondent is expected to not ask for clarification ("what do you mean by *most people*"?), and proceed to re-define these ambiguous sentences in her or his own way (and very quickly) in order to generate outcome indicators that generalize the subjective impression of one's self. Thus, in an effort to answer the first of the above items, a respondent may go through a quick (fast and frugal) abstraction process of approximately the following kind: "I like Joe and Jim and trust them, but others I do not—so I am indeed somewhat cynical of many others ... since most may also mean many ... I can say it is true that I tend to be that." Whatever way the actual thinking process proceeds, it is strictly bound by the time limit, and by the instruction. [33]

6.1 NEO-PI-R—Modification for our study

In our study we take a different perspective—we look at how respondents report arriving at their endorsement (or rejection) of selected NEO-PI-R scale items. In order to have access to these answering processes, we modified the NEO-PI-R in ways that selected 70 out of the original 240 and instructed the respondent to report the ways they arrived at their rating. We termed the abridged and modified version "NEO-PI-R-MICRO." From each section of the traditional NEO-PI-R (e.g. N1: Anxiety, N2: Angry Hostility, etc.), one or two questions were selected in

order to reduce the burden on the participants of having to fill out a lengthy questionnaire, which is often strenuous and arguably leads to minimal feedback. [34]

The answer format of the NEO-PI-R-MICRO was of the following kind for each item:

This format included two crucial differences from the original method for each selected item. [35]

First, the scale was turned from a numerical 4-point scale into a line scale with five points verbally marked. Here, they rated the extent to which each statement described themselves well (i.e. false, almost false, etc.). The fifth point injected into the rating scale (*hard to say*) was to allow for an outcome that would represent the diffused state by the participant's answering process. Almost any complex question in our lives starts from an answer "hard to say" and may then proceed to the differentiation of a temporarily clear-cut answer. [36]

Second, the respondent was instructed to explain the ways in which the rating was reached immediately after the rating. In order to collect qualitative data, several lines of blank space were added after the rating scale where participants could provide reasons and explanations to their quantitative answers, and were encouraged to elaborate as much as possible. [37]

7. Research Participants

This study included twelve undergraduate students recruited from an introductory personality course at a Massachusetts university. Participants included nine women and three men ranging between the ages of 20 and 25 (*M*=20.75 years, *SD*=1.49). The unmodified version of the NEO-PI-R was administered to the students in class (time 1). Directly following the completion of the original questionnaire, they took our modified version, the NEO-PI-R-MICRO (time 2). The time lapse between time 1 and time 2 was less than five minutes. [38]

8. Results

8.1 "Hard-to-say": Reality of subjective meanings

In order to answer any generic evaluative statement, participants are forced to transform the vagueness inherent in any question into something concrete (symbols) that allow for manipulations and contrasts. That process is inherently ambiguous—hence "hard to say" is in principle the most adequate answer to most of the items (cf. VALSINER, DIRIWÄCHTER & SAUCK, in press). [39]

Some of the personality inventory items entail "weighing oneself" on some scale of complex moral gestalts. For example:

I would rather be known as "merciful" than as "just."

This statement implicates a process of *self-reflection* during which participants need to proceed from vague ("I *would rather* be known as ...") to something more concrete (e.g. "I *like* to be known as ..."). The "*I*" needs to incorporate two abstract concepts (merciful/just) and based on its fusion needs to make an evaluation of whether one or the other concept is more favorable to self image. The original statement, of course, pushes the participant already into a particular direction (merciful) and it now rests upon him/her to either let the flow of forces proceed into the researchers intended direction (i.e. towards "True") or whether that flow shall be reversed. This entire process not only requires an understanding of what "mercy" and "just" means, but also how these two attributes, when applied to the self, are seen through the eyes of others and/or through one's own eyes.
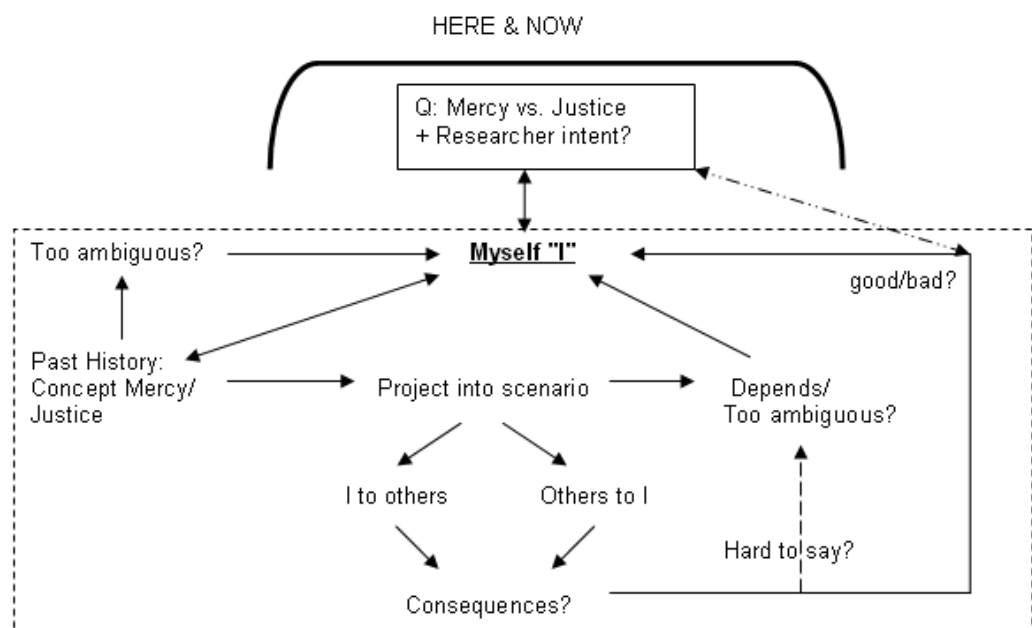

Figure 2: Meaning making structure of *I would rather be known as "merciful" than as "just."*

Response (3=Hard to say)
I don't know
Being just means having mercy
I would not want people to take advantage of me
Depends on situation but probably yes
That is a tough decision both have consequences
Other Responses (1=False / 5=True)
(1) Even handed but not overly forgiving
(1) I'd rather be just and stick to my feelings
(1) I believe in justice and those that don't give mercy don't deserve it
(1) I'd rather be just
(2) I would rather be fair and just
(2) I think its important to be just

Table 1: Self-evaluation towards self-attributes: *I would rather be known as "merciful" than as "just."* [40]

Hence, after initial determination of what *mercy* and *justice* mean, participants need to contrast whether "being nice" is better (or worse) than "being fair". This process requires a positioning of the self, embedded in a certain context with the above mentioned attributes, either as consequential to or of some action. For example, "Do I like it more when someone is nice or is it better when someone is fair?" or "Will others like it more when I'm nice or will they prefer it when I'm fair?" Again, past history is intricately interwoven into the totality of this evaluation. An important question to ask is: what was the actual, real-life, consequences of being nice or just? Invariably, this leads to a vast array of possible scenarios. For example—*punishing someone* because he/she has committed harm to someone else may be seen as just, but not merciful. However, *forgiving someone* for what they have done can also be seen as just, *as well as* merciful. Participants need to either project some specific scenario into the question, thereby effectively filtering out any other possible events, or give up the "battle" between all possible scenarios (withdrawing). [41]

Some of the juxtaposed moral complexes play in with there being either true, or false, or something else answers. For example:

> *I believe that the "new morality" of permissiveness is no morality at all.*

Confronted with abstract concepts, such as morality, one must first draw from past conceptualizations of what the term means. Hereby the process can be abruptly terminated if (a) the question itself is too diffuse to be understood or (b) if past conceptualization of the inquired concept (i.e. morality) is not seen as

compatible or fitting to the format of the researchers question (e.g. too ambiguous). [42]

On the other hand, when something "new" needs to be evaluated (implying a differentiation from a concept that has been "outdated"), it (a) implies that the new is now, and (b) that it needs to be contrasted to what "has been" (e.g. old morality = not permissive?). In the same process, "new" needs to be evaluated as to whether it fits the concept of its original meaning (e.g. permissiveness = morality?) as well as whether its meaning is compatible with self-image. This can lead to considerable confusion due to the ambiguous nature of the question, for what if the "new morality" is in fact the "old morality" of the participant?
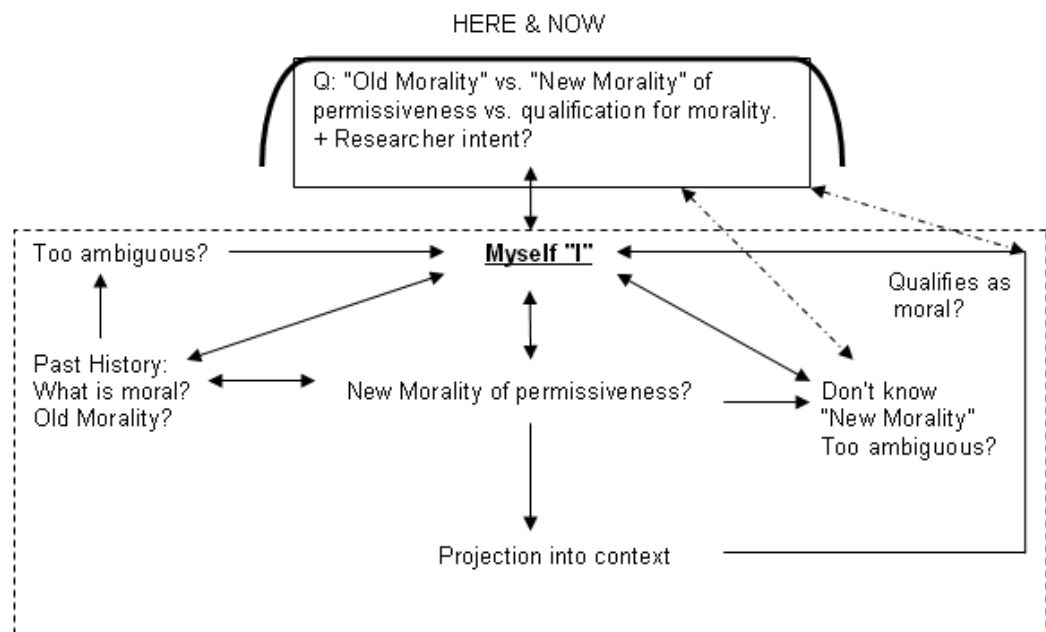

Figure 3: The complex "new morality"

Response (3=Hard to say)
What?
I don't understand
Since I don't know what the "new morality" of permissiveness is...
Don't understand statement
I have no idea
Didn't understand question
I don't know what this means
Other Responses (1=False / 5=True)
(1) I feel that morality is relative to the individual
(2) Sometimes I feel it is better not to judge and to do what you feel. Often people waste too much time and negative energy on things that don't really matter
(2) I think people should be allowed to do whatever they want and live by their own morals
(4) I'm not sure what "new morality" is but I'm not one to favor permissiveness
(5) If we don't stand up for things and simply tolerate everything it's the same as saying we don't care

Table 2: Evaluation of ambiguity—"*I believe that the 'new morality' of permissiveness is no morality at all.*" [43]

In the personality inventories we can observe that the respondent also gets instructions on how to relate to the complexes that create the self-problem. For example, it becomes increasingly "hard to say" to respond to complex questions such as:

> *It doesn't embarrass me too much if people ridicule and tease me.*

Responding to this item calls forth the creation of the meaning of too much in relation to ridicule and tease, yet with the social suggestion of the limitation of embarrassment. Schematically, it could be presented as in Figure 4:
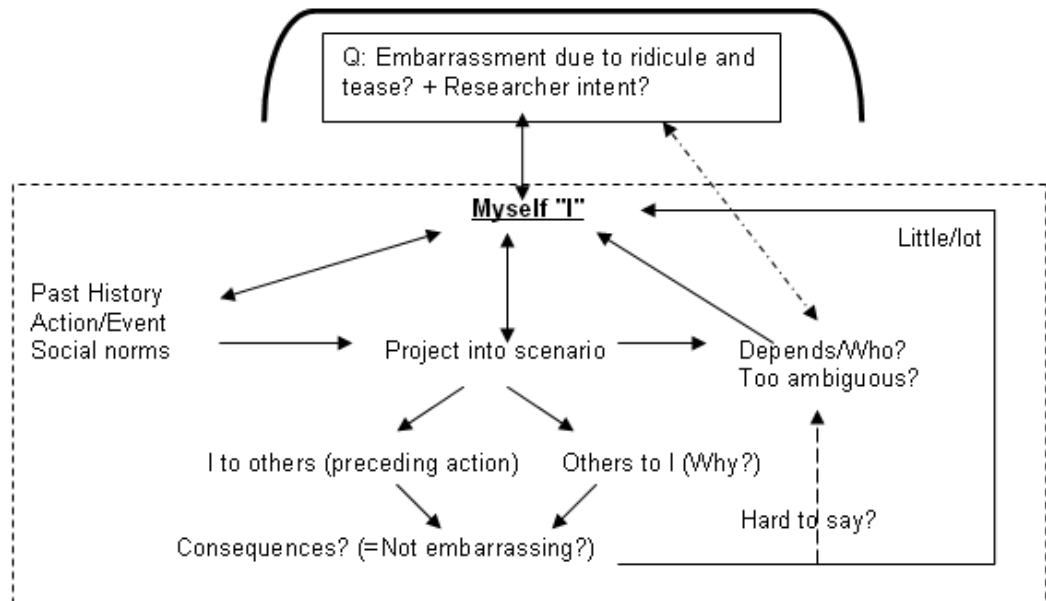
Figure 4: Embarrassment in the making

Response (3=Hard to say)
It depends on who and in what context, and what is said
It depends on the situation and who is doing the teasing.
If I am in a public situation, it is really hard for me, but I kind-a like when I am with friends and we tease each other
Depends on the context.
Depends on who is teasing me
Depends on the person who is teasing me—I don't mind at all if it is a friend
It depends on who does it & what they say.
Other Responses (1=False / 5=True)
(1) I believe the **opposite is true for me**
(1) I get **easily** embarrassed
(2) everybody gets embarrassed when teased **it's how you deal with** being embarrassed
(4**) sometimes** people just go too far
(4) I'm not sensitive to being teased **most of the time**

Table 3: Explanations of responses to "*It doesn't embarrass me too much if people ridicule and tease me*" [44]

Note the difference between the "balanced" (3="hard to say") and the rest of the answers—the latter include qualifiers that imbalance the situation. Any general item that is admittedly context-bound can be sufficiently responded to by a "hard to say" verdict. It is thus remarkable that our respondents create answers that imbalance the reality on "hard to say"—by the qualifiers. [45]

The notion of embarrassment is a necessary social one. It usually implies that we do not like how we see ourselves conditional upon the views of others. These views can be perceived as imaginary or real (see also OELFKE, 2003, 2004). However, the premise into which embarrassment is embedded necessitates that the self has suffered damage as a result of some action contingent upon evaluation by others. This leads to either an evaluation that asks "What did I do to deserve their treatment (ridicule/tease)?" or "How are their actions intended (maliciously)?" In both cases the self (subject) evaluates itself (object). If the self does not attain similar evaluations (shared commonality) embarrassment is not a likely result. The forces of the generic question again pull participants into a particular direction ("It doesn't embarrass me ...") so that the participant either needs to reverse or continue with the directed flow to obtain some outcome (True/False). If the individual is left submerged in ambiguity regarding the specificity of the event (=lack of concrete) or conditional intent of others he or she will not complete the designated process set up by the researcher (=withdraw/Hard-to-say). [46]

9. General Conclusion

Our analysis of the ways in which persons interpret the NEO-PI items they answer shows that there is no fixed meaning in any of the personality inventory items. Instead of existing as an objective set of items in a test, these statements are everyday-knowledge based statements about psychological reality. Even if the final set of possible outcome answers—"true" or "false" or rating scales of 4, 5, 7 or any other number of gradations is given—the respondent goes through a construction process that remains beyond the access of traditional personality inventories (VALSINER, DIRIWÄCHTER & SAUCK, in press). [47]

Yet these inventories—and inventory makers—need not be blamed for the myopia of their methods. Such short-sightedness is there by design—the theoretical background of these researchers prescribes the lack of interest in the actual processes that person uses to reach the outcome answer. It is not the problem of the method—quantitative or qualitative—that is being preferred by the researchers. It is the theoretical ethos—widely conceived—that guides our empirical myopias. [48]

So we reach the final point—if personality is to be studied as a whole, some version of Ganzheitspsychologie-based holistic theoretical construction would be needed. This perspective re-focuses the issue of personality to the process of handling different tasks—which could well be those of traditional personality inventories, such as NEO-PI. It is through the theoretical reconstruction of the field that quantitative methods can be successfully re-cycled and emerge as fresh qualitative instruments. [49]

References

Adorno, Theodor W.; Frenkel-Brunswik, Else; Levinson, Daniel J. & Sanford, R. Nevitt (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper.

Block, Jack (1995a). A contrarian view of the five-factor approach to personality description. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 187-215.

Block, Jack (1995b). Going beyond the five factors given. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 226-229.

Branco, Angela U. & Valsiner, Jaan (1997). Changing methodologies: A co-constructivist study of goal orientations in social interactions. *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 9(1), 35-64.

Cattell, Raymond B. (1944). Psychological measurement: normative, ipsative, interactive. *Psychological Review*, 51, 292-303l.

Danziger, Kurt (1990). *Reconstructing the subject*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Danziger, Kurt (1997). *Naming the mind*. London: Sage.

Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology (1901). New York: MacMillan

Digman, John M. (1990). Personality structure: Emergence of the five-factor model. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 41, 417-440.

Diriwächter, Rainer (2003). What really matters: Keeping the whole. Paper presented at the *10th Biennial Conference of International Society for Theoretical Psychology*, Istanbul, Turkey.

Diriwächter, Rainer (2004). Völkerpsychologie: The synthesis that never was. *Culture & Psychology*, 10(1), 85-109.

Diriwächter, Rainer (in press). Ganzheitspsychologie: The Doctrine. *From Past to Future*, 5(1), 3-16.

Ehrenfels, Christian von (1890). Über Gestaltqualitäten. *Vierteljahresschrift für wissenschaftliche Philosophie*, 14, 249-292.

Hornstein, Gail A. (1988). Quantifying psychological phenomena: debates, dilemmas and implications. In Jill. G. Morawski (Ed.), *The rise of experimentation in American psychology* (pp.1-34). New Haven, Ct.: Yale University Press.

John, Oliver P. (1990). The "big five" factor taxonomy: dimensions of personality in the natural language and in questionnaires. In Lawrence Pervin (Ed.), *Handbook of personality* (pp.66-100). New York: Guilford Press.

Krueger, Felix (1915). Über Entwicklungspsychologie. *Arbeiten zur Entwicklungspsychologie*, 1(1). Leipzig: Wilhelm Engelmann.

McCrae, Robert R. (2002). Cross-cultural research on the five-factor model of personality. In Walt J. Lonner, Doug L. Dinnel, Susan A. Hayes & Don N. Sattler (Eds.), *Online readings in psychology and culture* (Unit 6, chapter 1). Bellingham, Wa.: Center for Cross-Cultural Research, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington USA. Available at: http://www.wwu.edu/~culture/ (Oct 10, 2004).

Oelfke, Jennifer (2003). *Embarrassment exposed: Examining how Americans and Estonians deal with embarrassment*. Poster presented at the 13th Academic Spree Day, Worcester, MA.

Oelfke, Jennifer (2004). *Making meaning out of consumer products: An investigation of emotion and thought processes*. Poster presented at the 14th Academic Spree Day, Worcester, MA.

Peng, Kim, & Nisbett, Robert. E. (1999). Culture, dialectics, and reasoning about contradiction. *American Psychologist*, 54(9), 741-754.

Piaget, Jean (1922). Essai sur la multiplication logique et les dèbuts de la pensée formelle chez l'enfant. *Journal de Psychologie*, 19, 222-261.

Rosenbaum, Philip J. & Valsiner, Jaan (2004). *The points in the ends: what rating scale ends mean?* Poster presented at the 3rd International Conference on Dialogical Self, Warsaw, August 26-29, 2004.

Sander, Friedrich (1962). Das Menschenbild in der neueren Psychologie. In Friedrich Sander & Hans Volkelt (Eds.), *Ganzheitspsychologie* (pp.369-382). München, Germany: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung.

Singer, Jerome L., & Bonanno, George A. (1990). Personality and private experience: Individual variations in consciousness and in attention to subjective phenomena. In Lawrence Pervin (Ed.), *Handbook of personality* (pp.419-444). New York: Guilford Press.

Stern, William (1911). *Die Differentielle Psychologie in ihren methodischen Grundlagen*. Leipzig, Germany: Verlag von Johann Ambrosius Barth.

Valsiner, Jaan (1998). *The guided mind.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Valsiner, Jaan (2000a). *Culture and human development*. London: Sage.

Valsiner, Jaan (2000b). Data as representations: contextualizing qualitative and quantitative research strategies. *Social Science Information, 39*(1), 99-113.

Valsiner, Jaan (2003a). *Theory construction and theory use in psychology: Creating knowledge beyond social ideologies*. Keynote presentation at the 10th Biennial Conference of *International Society for Theoretical Psychology* (ISTP) in Istanbul on June, 24.

Valsiner, Jaan (2003b). Culture and its transfer: Ways of creating general knowledge through the study of cultural particulars. In Walt J. Lonner, Doug L. Dinnel, Susan A. Hayes, & Don N. Sattler (Eds.), *Online readings in psychology and culture* (Unit 2, Chapter 12). Center for Cross-Cultural Research, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington USA. Available at: http://www.wwu.edu/~culture/ (Oct 10, 2004).

Valsiner, Jaan & Diriwächter, Rainer (in press). Qualitative Forschungsmethoden in historischen und epistemologischen Kontexten. In Günter Mey (Ed.) *Qualitative Forschung in der Entwicklungspsychologie*. Köln, Germany: Kölner Studien Verlag.

Valsiner, Jaan; Diriwächter, Rainer & Sauck, Christine (in press). Diversity in unity: Standard questions and non-standard interpretations. In Roger Bibace, James Laird, Kenneth Noller & Jaan Valsiner (Eds.), *Science and medicine in dialogue*. Stamford, Ct.: Greenwood Press.

Wagoner, Brady & Valsiner, Jaan (2003). *Rating tasks in psychology: from construction of static ontology to dialogical synthesis of meaning*. Poster presented at 10th Biennial Conference of International Society for Theoretical Psychology (ISTP) in Istanbul on June, 24.

Wellek, Albert (1950). *Die Wiederherstellung der Seelenwissenschaft im Lebenswerk Felix Kruegers*. Hamburg, Gemany: Richard Meiner Verlag.

Werner, Heinz (1938). William Stern's personalistics and psychology of personality. *Character and Personality*, 7, 109-125.

Authors

Rainer *DIRIWÄCHTER* is a doctoral student of psychology at Clark University. He is currently studying *Ganzheitspsychologie* with emphasis on the process of Aktualgenese.

Contact:

Rainer Diriwächter

Clark University
Frances L. Hiatt School of Psychology
950 Main Street
Worcester, MA 01610 (USA)

E-mail: rdiriwaechter@clarku.edu

Jaan VALSINER is the founding editor (1995) of the Sage journal, *Culture & Psychology*. He is currently professor and chair of Department of Psychology, Clark University, USA, where he also edits a journal in history of psychology—*From Past to Future: Clark Papers in the History of Psychology*. He has published many books, the most recent of which are *The guided mind* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1998), *Culture and human development* (London: Sage, 2000) and *Comparative study of human cultural development* (Madrid: Fundacion Infancia y Aprendizaje, 2001). He has edited (with Kevin CONNOLLY) the *Handbook of Developmental Psychology* (London: Sage, 2003).

Contact:

Jaan Valsiner

Clark University
Frances L. Hiatt School of Psychology
950 Main Street
Worcester, MA 01610 (USA)

E-mail: jvalsiner@clarku.edu

Christine Cutrim SAUCK is a doctoral student in Clark University's clinical psychology program. Both her research and clinical interests include parent-child relationships, with a particular focus on the development of children and parents within their family systems.

Contact:

Christine C. Sauck

Clark University
Frances L. Hiatt School of Psychology
950 Main Street
Worcester, MA 01610 (USA)

E-mail: csauck@clarku.edu

Citation

Revised 6/2008