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Personality and Personal Relationship Processes:
Concluding Thoughts¹

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In the introductory article for this special edition of *JSPR*, I indicated that Harry Stack Sullivan's (1953/1997, 1954/1970) interpersonal theory of personality could be used as a conceptual frame of reference for understanding the results of research on personality and personal relationship processes. In this concluding article, I apply Sullivan's interpersonal theory to the results of the seven empirical articles in this edition. Consider Sullivan's (1954/1970) elaboration of his theorem of reciprocal emotion:

This theorem is an extremely general statement. . . . I believe that if one studies its full implications, a great many things pertaining to the study of interpersonal relations... will be clarified. . . . In this general statement, I use the word 'needs' in the broadest sense. . . . Thus, in discussing the development of personality, we speak of all the important motives, or 'motors,' of human behaviour as *needs for satisfaction*. There is a *need* for satisfaction of various forces such as lust and hunger; and *need* in this particular sense also includes the need for a feeling of personal security in interpersonal relations, which in turn can be called a need to avoid, alleviate, or escape from anxiety, or, again, a need for self-esteem. (p. 122, emphasis in original)

Among the empirical articles in this special edition, the paper by Markey and Markey is most directly influenced by Sullivan's (1953/1997, 1954/1970) interpersonal theory. Markey and Markey observe that two of the best-known intellectual descendants of Sullivan, namely Robert Carson (1969) and Jerry Wiggins (1979), provided different models of complementarity. Markey and Markey report

that Carson's model, but not Wiggins's model, predicted relationship quality (i.e., among those couples with the highest levels of relationship quality, partners were especially similar in warmth/dominance, yet especially dissimilar in dominance).

The paper by Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra is influenced more directly by Gordon Allport's (1937, 1961) trait theory than by Sullivan's (1953/1997, 1954/1970) interpersonal theory. Thus, Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra apply a five-factor model of personality traits in general (Goldberg, 1990), rather than a circumplex model of personality traits specifically within the interpersonal domain (e.g., Wiggins, 1979). Nevertheless, various researchers (e.g., Hofstee, de Raad, & Goldberg, 1992; Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990) have demonstrated that the Big Five factor of extraversion represents a blend of high levels of dominance and high levels of nurturance; and the Big Five factor of agreeableness represents a blend of low levels of dominance and high levels of nurturance. Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra's findings that similarity in extraversion was significantly and positively associated with relationship quality, passion, intimacy, and commitment among one subset of romantic couples (i.e., couples who were friends before becoming romantically involved) complement the findings of Markey and Markey.

The paper by Kane et al. is influenced more directly by John Bowlby's (1969/1997, 1973/1998, 1982/1998) attachment theory than by Sullivan's (1953/1997, 1954/1970) interpersonal theory. Consequently, Kane et al. examined individuals' attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance (rather than individuals' self-esteem, a key concept in Sullivan's interpersonal theory) as predictors of heterosexual partners' relationship satisfaction. By the same token, even Bowlby (1973/1998) acknowledged that "...Since [Sullivan] believes that a main anxiety-inducing sanction used by a mother is restriction or denial of tenderness..., he comes at times near to my

own concept of separation anxiety and its exacerbation by threats of abandonment” (pp. 445-446). Kane et al.’s findings that insecurity of individuals’ attachment is a significant negative predictor of partners’ favorability of perceptions of individuals as caregivers, which in turn is a significant positive predictor of individuals as caregivers is consistent with both Bowlby’s attachment theory and Sullivan’s interpersonal theory. However, Kane et al.’s findings that the type of insecurity of individuals’ attachment that significantly and negatively predicted partners’ favorability of perceptions of individuals as caregivers depends upon individuals’ gender (i.e., men’s attachment avoidance, but not men’s attachment anxiety, was a significant negative predictor of favorability of women’s perceptions of men as caregivers; whereas women’s attachment anxiety, but not women’s attachment avoidance, was a significant negative predictor of men’s favorability of perceptions of women as caregivers) would not have been anticipated by either Bowlby’s attachment theory or Sullivan’s interpersonal theory.

The papers by Donnellan et al., Fischer et al., and Kumashiro et al. are more aligned with the basic premise behind Sullivan’s (1953/1997, 1954/1970) interpersonal theory (i.e., personality is cause and consequence of personal relationship processes) than with tests of specific hypotheses (e.g., the components of Sullivan’s theorem of reciprocal emotion) that might be derived from Sullivan’s interpersonal theory. Also, the papers by Donnellan et al., Fischer et al., and Kumashiro et al. – like the papers by Markey and Markey, Barelds and Barelds-Dijkstra, and Kane et al. – include data from both partners in each relationship dyad, a methodological choice that is consistent with Sullivan’s (1954/1970) focus on the dyad as the unit of analysis. Although Sullivan directly studied therapeutic relationships rather than romantic relationships, Sullivan’s interpersonal theory

suggests that many of the same processes that characterize therapeutic relationships also characterize romantic relationships.

Finally, the paper by Smith et al. may be less obviously relevant to the content or the methodology of Sullivan's (1953/1997, 1954/1970) interpersonal theory than are the other empirical articles in this special edition. Nonetheless, the findings by Smith et al. regarding the Big Five traits of agreeableness (marginal positive predictor of desire) and extraversion (significant positive predictor of feeling loved during sexual interaction; marginal positive predictor of sexual enjoyment, intimacy, and respect) can be readily reconciled with the view (e.g., Hofstee, de Raad, & Goldberg, 1992; Trapnell & Wiggins, 1990) that the Big Five trait of extraversion represents a blend of the interpersonal traits of positive dominance and positive nurturance; whereas the Big Five trait of agreeableness represent a blend of the interpersonal traits of negative dominance and positive nurturance. Overall, the results of Smith et al. can be understood within the conceptual framework of Sullivan's interpersonal theory.

One striking feature of this special edition is that all seven empirical articles employ quantitative measures of personality constructs. Given that six of the seven empirical articles were written by psychologists (the one exception is the paper by Fischer et al.), the emphasis on quantitative measures of personality constructs is not surprising (for an overview of psychologists' increasing disdain for qualitative measures of personality constructs since World War II, see Runyan, 1997). The reliance on paper-and-pencil measures of personality constructs among the seven empirical articles would be anathema to Sullivan (1954/1970), who argued that individuals' verbal and nonverbal behavior should be the sole sources of personality data. However, Leary's (1957) interpretation of individuals' self-reported thoughts

and feelings as covert behavior has allowed quantitatively oriented followers of Sullivan (e.g., Wiggins, 1979) to proceed with paper-and-pencil measures of personality constructs. Overall, the use of quantitative measures of personality constructs in the seven empirical articles is understandable in light of the psychological background of most of the authors in this special edition.

By the same token, the lack of qualitative measures of personality constructs in the seven empirical articles underscores the need for more research on personality and personal relationship processes in sociology, communication studies, and family studies. Research on personality and social structure, conducted historically by sociologists and anthropologists (Ryff, 1987), is more likely to utilize qualitative measures of personality constructs than is most research on personality by psychologists (C. W. Stephan & W. G. Stephan, 1985). Qualitatively oriented research on personality constructs, especially as conducted by scholars in sociology, communication studies, and family studies, could help bring relationship science one step closer to fulfilling Sullivan's (1953/1997) goal of a truly interdisciplinary field of interpersonal relations.

Another striking feature of this special edition is that all seven empirical articles operationalize personality in terms of *traits*, which are relatively stable aspects of personality of which individuals generally are aware. Self-reported traits essentially are individuals' response to the question, "What are you like?" (Ewen, 2003). The emphasis on traits in the empirical articles within this special edition probably is not accidental. In his earliest formulation of trait theory, Allport (1937) contended that the concept of trait should be the primary concept in the study of personality. By Allport's standard, the importance of traits as personality constructs in the empirical articles within this special edition is entirely appropriate.

In identifying directions for future research on personality and personal relationship processes, I believe that relationships scholars in psychology, sociology, communication studies, and family studies would benefit from examining a variety of personality constructs, including – but not limited to – traits. For example, around the time that Allport (1937) proposed a personality theory of individual differences in traits, Henry A. Murray (1938) proposed a personality theory of individual differences in *motives*, which are relatively stable aspects of personality of which individuals are not necessarily aware. Whether measured via projective tests or via objective tests, motives essentially are individuals' answer to the question, "What drives you to do what you do?" (Ewen, 2003). All of the motives that Murray identified (i.e., abasement, achievement, affiliation, aggression, autonomy, counteraction, defendance, deference, dominance, exhibition, harm avoidance, infavoidance, nurturance, order, play, rejection, sentience, sex, succorance, understanding) are viable predictors of personal relationship processes. Although traits and motives with similar names (e.g., dominance and nurturance) would need to be distinguished from each other conceptually and empirically, enterprising researchers might find that traits and motives complement each other in explaining relationship dynamics (see Winter, John, Stewart, Klohnen, & Duncan, 1998).

As I noted in the introductory paper to this special edition, neither traits nor motives exhaust the possibilities concerning the range of personality constructs that relationship researchers might employ as predictors of interpersonal behavior. Attitudes, values, moods, and emotions are some of the additional personality constructs that come to mind. In closing, I hope that this list of constructs will encourage scholars to think broadly about the ways in which personality is manifested in personal relationship processes.

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