Contextualized Personality, Beyond Traits

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Abstract: Personality psychologists have become increasingly interested in how personality varies across social roles. Within this ‘contextualized’ approach, researchers almost invariably focus on assessing personality traits. Although these characteristics are no doubt important components of personality, there are many aspects of the person that are not adequately represented by traits. This article fleshes out the nature of these additional personality characteristics relevant to contextualized personality. I argue that, just as the study of personality in its generalized form has benefited from recognition of three conceptual levels (viz. traits, goals and life narratives), so too would contextualized approaches to personality. Evidence of the predictive ability of context-specific goals and narratives is provided, as is discussion of the functional relations among variables at personality’s three conceptual levels, and the interplay between contextualized and generalized self-representations. During this discussion, I argue for adoption of a relational meta-theory in the study of personality. Considerable gains can be made in understanding personhood by unifying appreciation of context with a multilevel conception of personality. Copyright © 2015 European Association of Personality Psychology

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This article is meant to say something novel about two rather seasoned and largely accepted ideas regarding the nature of personality. The first of these ideas is that personality is manifest in different ways within each of the contexts and social roles in which we participate (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993). The second of these ideas, popularized by McAdams (1995, 2013), is that personality, in its generalized form, is best represented by three distinct conceptual ‘levels’ (viz. traits, goals and life narratives). The ‘something novel’ here is an attempt to marry these two ideas that, more often than not, have passed each other within the realm of personality psychology like ships in the night.

Researchers interested in assessing personality in its contextualized and role-bound form have almost invariably equated ‘personality’ and ‘personality traits’—that is, when assessing the manner in which individuals construe their personality within specific contexts, these researchers have usually assessed only traits. This is not to suggest that other personality characteristics have been entirely ignored. McConnell (2011), for example, posited that contextualized personality may contain other aspects and characteristics in addition to traits. These ‘other things’ (p. 6), however, are only rarely specified and even less frequently described in any manner of detail. This, I believe, is a problem, as consideration of additional personality characteristics holds potential to offer insights into the natures of a broader array of psychological constructs, while also contributing to a more complete framework for understanding the full landscape of personality. The importance of the approach championed here is predicated on documenting the nature of personality as experienced by the individual, rather than demonstrating incremental validity or improved prediction of behaviour. The approach itself is operationalized via the argument that contextualized personality can be conceived to consist of three conceptual levels: traits, goals and life narratives (McAdams, 1995, 2013).

This article contains four ‘parts’. First, in Part I, I provide a brief overview of the contextualized personality literature. I discuss the limitations of its insights, both theoretically and empirically, resulting from this literature’s restricted focus on the manners in which trait displays differ among role-bound self-representations, at the expense of additional personality characteristics. Part II outlines the notion that generalized personality goes beyond traits and can be understood to include goals and life narratives as additional distinct conceptual levels (McAdams, 1995, 2013). I go on to offer evidence that this conception has enriched understanding of the person. Part III synthesizes the approaches to personality outlined in Parts I and II, by arguing that contextualized personality may also be understood in terms of the three conceptual levels: traits, goals and life narratives. In addition, I briefly discuss the relations among personality levels, and the relations between contextualized and generalized personality. Finally, in Part IV, I summarize Parts I–III and offer suggestions for future research.

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1Approaches to the study of personality in which context is not explicitly considered are often referred to as ‘decontextualized’. As Wood and Roberts (2006) noted, however, no measure of personality is truly decontextualized. Thus, I use the term ‘generalized’ to represent this approach.
PART I: OVERVIEW OF CONTEXTUALIZED PERSONALITY

The contextualized approach to personality (e.g. Donahue et al., 1993; Heller, Watson, Komar, Min, & Perunovic, 2007; Roberts, 2007; Roberts & Donahue, 1994; Wood & Roberts, 2006) takes as a starting point the fact that individuals often perceive their personality characteristics to differ across the many social roles and contexts they occupy throughout their lives. This perception requires awareness of the self in relation to the recurrent contexts it inhabits. At its extreme, such variability casts the self as an entity that continually creates itself anew in response to the demands of the immediate situation (Gergen, 1991; Lifton, 1993). More commonly, however, this perception involves recognition that patterns of personality functioning vary with the roles and contexts in which we routinely find ourselves, from being a ‘friend’, to a ‘mother’, to dining at a restaurant and so on. Emergence of context-related variability itself is thought to result from a transaction between individuals’ generalized personality characteristics and the expectations and norms associated with the specific social roles and contexts he or she experiences (Burke & Tully, 1977; Stryker, 1989, 2007).

Selves contextualized

Researchers examining the manners in which personality varies across contexts have done so primarily via a consideration of participants’ conceptions of their personalities within various contexts. Indeed, contextualized personality researchers have, for the most part, explicitly chosen to focus on perceptions of personality characteristics within social roles, rather than the behaviours that may be exhibited in these roles (Baird & Lucas, 2011; Donahue et al., 1993). This is not without good reason, several good reasons actually.

First, in addition to being often less taxing on researchers’ resources relative to other assessment procedures, self-reports have provided important insights regarding relations between personality and social roles (e.g. Roberts & Donahue, 1994). For example, self-reported personality characteristics corresponding to specific contexts are known to vary systematically (e.g. individuals report being more assertive and controlling when in leadership roles than in subordinate roles; Fournier, Moskowitz, & Zuroff, 2002). Second, while many types of personality characteristics are amenable to observer and peer reports (e.g. Borkenau, Mauer, Riemann, Spinath, & Angleitner, 2004; Hogan, 1982), certain characteristics (e.g. autobiographical narratives) are only capable of being assessed via self-report, as self-report constitutes the most direct route to a person’s psychological experiences (Barresi & Juckes, 1997; Johnson, 1997; Paulhus & Vazire, 2007).

Given historical precedent and the advantages recognized earlier, I focus on the manner in which individuals conceive of, or represent, themselves, both generally and within the various roles and contexts relevant to their lives (although the topic of additional assessment methods will be considered in Part IV). As such, I use the term contextualized self-representation to denote individuals’ conceptions of their own personalities within specific contexts (e.g. as a daughter or employee) and the term generalized self-representation to represent the manner in which individuals perceive their personalities more broadly, without reference to specific contexts.

Empirical efforts to contextualize personality

Donahue et al. (1993) can be largely credited with bringing attention to the study of personality as manifest in various social roles and contexts. These researchers were interested in examining the relation between inter-contextual variability in personality and well-being. To do so, they prompted a sample of approximately 100 undergraduate participants to complete a series of personality inventories roughly aligning with the five-factor model (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008) and corresponding with five distinct contexts. That is, participants were prompted to rate themselves on the same series of traits within the roles of ‘friend’, ‘romantic partner’, ‘son or daughter’, ‘student’ and ‘worker’. Measures of well-being were also administered. To quantify the degree of variability among contextualized representations of personality, each participant’s responses to the five contextualized personality inventories were organized into a matrix, with the self-reported traits aligned along rows and the five contexts aligned along columns. Each respondent’s rating matrix was then subjected to a factor analysis, and the percentage of variability not subsumed by the first resulting factor was noted (this value was thought to index the extent to which personality traits varied across contexts). This measure of inter-contextual trait variability correlated negatively with well-being. This finding has been replicated in several additional studies (for a meta-analytic review of this research, see Bleidorn & Ködding, 2013).

Empirical efforts to contextualize personality redux

As far as definitive conclusions go, the previous discussion may be as good as it gets. But, as Baird, Le, and Lucas (2006) have shown, the most popular method for quantifying inter-contextual variability in personality, the factor-based method summarized earlier, is flawed, as it is influenced by both variability of items across contexts and variability of inventory items within contexts. As they state, ‘to have a low [level of inter-contextual variability in self-reported traits]… a person must have a small amount of variance within each item across each role and a large amount of variance across items within the same role. However, only the former source of variance is relevant to theories of variability’ (p. 513).

Baird et al. (2006) introduced an alternative measure of inter-contextual variability that does not fall prey to this limitation. In this alternative measure, the standard deviation of a given personality inventory item across contexts is regressed onto this item’s mean (again, across all applicable contexts) and mean squared. The resulting residual is then recorded. The residuals from all personality inventory items are then averaged to produce a single score. Positive scores indicate more variability than would be expected on the basis of mean-level information alone, whereas negative scores...
indicate less variability than would be expected. Employing this measure, Baird and colleagues noted nonsignificant relations between inter-contextual variability in self-reported traits and well-being (i.e. the relations between variability across contexts in traits and indicators of well-being have tended to dissipate to nonsignificance, sometimes even changing sign; see, for example, their Study 1).³

Despite the methodological insight of Baird et al. (2006), some have continued to examine the relation between well-being and variability in the self-reported traits associated with contextualized self-representations using the measure popularized by Donahue et al. (1993; e.g. Daukantaitė & Thompson, 2014). Others have begun to examine, using the measure introduced by Baird et al. (2006), the relations between inter-contextual personality variability and outcome variables distinct from well-being (e.g. narcissism; Fukushima & Hosoe, 2011). Despite this slightly expanded focus, however, researchers interested in contextualized personality have continued to concern themselves almost exclusively with traits (e.g. McConnell, 2011; Wood & Roberts, 2006). This is unfortunate, as developments in the generalized personality literature have shown that there is much to personality beyond traits.

PART II: OVERVIEW OF GENERALIZED PERSONALITY

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, trait-based models of personality predominated the generalized personality literature (John et al., 2008). McAdams (1995) specified several advantages associated with this increased focus on traits. He, however, also identified a major deficiency of this orientation: As a result of the focus on traits, other important personality characteristics had become neglected. Traits are valuable in providing descriptions of behavioural patterns, but they are woefully ill-equipped to provide answers to questions regarding motivational and meaning-making aspects of personality.

Given this inadequacy, McAdams (1995) offered a model of personality comprised of three conceptual ‘levels’. The first, most directly biological level of this model is represented by traits, considered the bedrock of any viable conception of personality. Motivations represent the central concept at the model’s second level.³ The third level is represented by consciously and purposefully created internal and evolving life narratives: psychosocial constructions of the past, present and future that imbue life with a sense of meaning and purpose.

Consideration of these levels contributes to more than understanding of personal description. These three levels map onto three principal ways in which individuals perceive of the self: as an ‘actor’ (corresponding to the behavioural patterns assessed at Level 1); ‘agent’ (corresponding to the motivations assessed at Level 2) and, finally, as an ‘author’ (corresponding to the autobiographical narratives assessed at Level 3; McAdams, 2013). In the following, I further address the second and third levels of this model.

Motivational aspects of personality

Whereas traits correspond to dispositional tendencies, motivations reflect what one wants to do, obtain and become (Roberts & Robins, 2000) and what one does to get there (Hudson & Roberts, 2014; McCabe & Fleeson, 2012). Because of these differing foci, it is perhaps unsurprising that traits and motivations have led largely ‘separate lives’ (Winter, John, Stewart, Klohn, & Duncan, 1998, p. 230) within our discipline.

There exist several methods to assess motivation (for a review, see Austin & Vancouver, 1996; McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). With increasing frequency, however, researchers interested in expressions of motivations have focused on personal goals, now largely recognized as the ‘optimal unit[s] of analysis in motivational personality psychology’ (Emmons, 1999, p. 23).

Goals provide important insights into individual differences in personality (Dunlop, 2013; Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2013; Emmons & King, 1989), because they indicate construals of everyday concerns, challenges and opportunities, many of which involve relations with others, as well as how individuals conceive of themselves as psychological agents (McAdams, 2013). Although personality psychologists should certainly not ignore participants’ subjective evaluations of their goals (perceived difficulty, importance, etc.) or the efficacy they exhibit while pursuing these goals, my primary concern here lies in the content of goals. I adopt this focus because, relative to consideration of participants’ ratings of goals, analysis of goal content allows for consideration of motivation in a more ecologically valid and unrestrained manner (because the individual is free to list any goals that he or she chooses).

The storied nature of personality

Traits represent the dispositional basis of individual differences, and goals offer a way to conceptualize human motivations. But neither traits nor goals are capable of capturing perhaps what is the most distinctive and unique aspect of the person and, by extension, one’s personality—senses of purpose, meaning and identity (Giddens, 1991; McAdams, 1995).

McAdams (1995) proposed that, within modern ‘western’ societies, identity is attained at the third level of personality, via a coherent and compelling life narrative (i.e. a narrative identity; McAdams, 2013). By creating such a story, the narrator draws connections between life experiences and self-conceptions, infusing life with a sense of meaning, purpose and unity. Construction of life narratives, thus, allows people to explain their pasts—and selves—to themselves, and others. Such construction represents an unwieldy mix of things that ‘actually’ happened and interpretations the
narrator has given to them. In this sense, life narratives are poor means to attain factual summaries of events and histories (e.g. Greenwald, 1980). This, however, is beside the point—‘The empirical truth of the story is not at issue’ (Nasby & Read, 1997, p. 883). Rather than evaluating these narratives solely in reference to ‘historical truth’ (Spence, 1982), the degree to which these narratives are successful in helping authors understand their lives and live these lives most adeptly requires consideration.

This notion that we understand and articulate our lives through construction of life narratives is consistent with the writings of many scholars peppered throughout the social sciences and humanities (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003; Flanagan, 1996; Ricoeur, 1985; Singer, 1997). Flanagan (1996), for example, argued that personal identity is attained through the ‘storying’ of relations between events and the self (a phenomenon he referred to as ‘narrative connectedness’, p. 65), whereas Singer (1997) proposed that creating a life narrative allows the narrator to carve out a ‘unique psychological territory’ (p. 32). The idea of a life narrative representing one’s psychological territory is particularly apt: Although individuals may have comparable trait profiles and pursue similar goals, no two individuals have lived the same life nor, for that reason, articulate the same life narrative.

Further buttressing ties between life narratives and identity, characteristics of life narratives have been found to relate to variables tied, in theory, to a healthy, mature identity. Baerger and McAdams (1999), for example, observed a positive relation between the degree to which life narratives were coherent (indexed in terms of whether the stories were linear, affectively consistent, contained sufficient background information and resolved any ambiguity or incongruence) and well-being, whereas McLean and Pratt (2006) noted a positive relation between the complexity of participants’ narratives (operationalized in terms of the lessons and insights abstracted from these stories) and the degree to which participants had actively reflected upon, and committed to, particular occupational, religious and political ideologies (often recognized together as a composite index of psychosocial maturity; Chandler & Dunlop, 2012). Finally, association has been observed between tendency to construct redemptive personal narratives, wherein bad experiences are construed as leading to something good, and prosocial behaviours such as volunteering within the community (Walker & Frimer, 2007).

From narrative to identity: final thoughts

Life narratives are known to relate to variables relevant to identity. It is prudent to consider, however, whether, on a moment-to-moment basis, individuals actually do go about creating such stories in the interest of identity. Narratives appear to be inescapable aspects of our personal and social lives, as they constitute viable and spontaneous routes by which we seek to understand a whole host of things, from random shapes moving on a screen (Heider & Simmel, 1944) to the very lives we are in the process of living. That being said, save for adolescents grappling with realization that absolute truth may be more of an ideal than an attainable prospect (Chandler & Dunlop, 2012), individuals facing ‘identity crises’ and persons who regularly unwind in oak-lined rooms and leather armchairs, active and deliberate reflection on who one is, where one came from and where one may be going is likely relatively rare. It follows that it is unrealistic to think that most are continuously and consciously constructing and revising their life narratives. When crises are underfoot or threats to self-continuity arise, however, active construction of narratives represents a tremendous resource, one capable of surmounting such challenges (Chandler & Dunlop, 2012; Chandler et al., 2003). Finally, although we may not always be in the process of consciously crafting our life narratives, implicitly, we continuously maintain a sense of what Tulving (1985) termed ‘autonoetic consciousness’, a subjective awareness of our pasts and futures, and this awareness often takes a narrative form. Thus, although certain individuals are more likely than others to reflect actively upon their life narratives, a story-like thread connects our pasts, presents and futures, and most people express these life narratives to some degree at some point.

The three levels of personality revisited

Traits, goals and narratives are distinct from each other, offering unique information regarding the natures of personality and the self; traits and goals are necessary for understanding the self as an ‘actor’ and ‘agent’, respectively (McAdams, 2013), whereas narratives represent ‘the [very] substance of the self’ (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007, p. 275). This, however, is not meant to suggest that these levels are entirely independent. Indeed, there exists a sizable (and growing) body of literature noting significant relations among personality characteristics across levels (e.g. McAdams et al., 2004; Roberts & Robins, 2000; Wilt, Olson, & McAdams, 2011). In no empirical investigation known, though, have variables across personality levels been found to correlate to degrees suggestive of redundancy or multicollinearity (e.g. Woike, 1995).

How then, if at all, do the variables at these levels transact? For example, do our traits influence the timbre of our narratives, or might personal goals influence traits? McAdams (1995) argued that there is no ‘holy writ dictating … neat levels feeding into neat levels according to general laws of consistency’ (p. 386). Yet, aside from this assertion and despite the fact that various relations have been noted among variables functioning at personality levels, formal discussion of the natures of such relations across all three levels of personality has only rarely (e.g. Hermans, 1996; McCrae, 1996) been offered. Part III offers such discussion, as well as a description of the relation between generalized and contextualized personalities.

PART III: CONTEXTUALIZED PERSONALITY, BEYOND TRAITS

I contend that, just as the study of general personality became hamstrung by the focus on traits, so too has the
contextualized approach to personality. Although researchers interested in contextualized personality often indicate recognition of content beyond traits in contextualized self-representations (e.g. McConnell, 2011; Thomas, Ditzfeld, & Showers, 2013), this additional content has yet to be sufficiently articulated. Aspects of goals and narratives associated with generalized self-concept have been found to provide more complete pictures of certain psychological phenomena. Manzczak, Zapata-Gietl, and McAdams (2014), for example, examined the manifestation of regulatory processes at each personality level (i.e. themes of ‘prevention’ and ‘promotion’ were considered in narratives and goals, as were dispositional manifestations of these constructs at the trait level) in relation to well-being. They observed that themes of prevention and promotion in participants’ autobiographical narratives predicted well-being, even while ‘controlling’ for traits’. This is but one example underscoring the fact that, within the generalized personality literature, considerable gains have been made by moving beyond a focus on traits. I contend that a similar benefit will result if goals and narratives are considered alongside traits in the contextualized personality literature. Below, I provide a rationale for the existence of context-specific goals and narratives, before briefly summarizing the empirical work in which I and others directly assessed context-specific goals and narratives.

A rationale for contextualized goals and life narratives

The ubiquity of goals is surpassed, perhaps solely, by their variability in scope. There exists a great range of these motivational units; some are broad, transcending any one context (e.g. ‘be a good person’), whereas others are highly contextualized (e.g. ‘impress my coworkers’). Although in theory goals may range in scope, when individuals are prompted to report their personal goals (whether by being prompted for the things they are ‘typically trying to do’ or list the ‘personal projects’ they are currently working on), they tend to produce motivational units that are contextually delineated (Kaiser & Ozer, 1995; Sheldon & Elliot, 2000). Furthermore, Roberts and Robins (2000) have noted that the ratings of prespecified goals align with a taxonomy predicated on specific contexts and domains (e.g. ‘social’ life goals). Therefore, it seems that cutting goals ‘at their joints’ requires recognizing context.

This aligns with much theorizing within psychology: Goals have often been framed as being developed and articulated within specific domains and periods in the lifespan (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Boekaerts, 1999; Cantor, 1990; Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2013; McAdams, 1995). Indeed, some researchers have gone so far as to recognize personal goals as ‘person-in-context’ variables, personality characteristics inseparable from the contexts in which they are pursued (Little, 1999), while others have proclaimed that consideration ‘of goals implies consideration of context’ (Nasby & Read, 1997, p. 878). Consistent with this framing, within McAdams’ (1995) model, goals are distinguished from traits on the basis of their contextualized nature. Indeed, although McAdams does not recognize a distinction between contextualized and generalized self-representations, goals may actually hold greater relevance to contextualized self-representations than to the generalized self-concept (I return to this possibility in Part IV).

As is the case with goals, some narrative theories have recognized that contextualized self-representations contain life narratives (Bakhtin, 1984; Dunlop & Walker, 2015; Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2013). For example, Bakhtin (1984) conceived of life as a ‘polyphonic’ novel, with various plots waxing and waning in relevance on the basis of external demand from moment to moment. From this perspective, there exists a narrative-based identity within each and every specific context or role—that is, multiple life narratives corresponding to our numerous contextualized self-representations (see also Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

Only a minority of narrative theorists, however, explicitly endorse this perspective, as most frame narratives in a more generalized manner. Nevertheless, when elements of life narratives are produced in real life, they tend to manifest in the form of ‘situated stories’ (McLean et al., 2007), narratives ‘created within a specific situation, by particular individuals, for particular audiences, to fulfill particular goals’ (p. 262). Thus, when autobiographical narratives emerge outside the confines of structured interview settings, they tend to possess highly contextualized flavours. Once this is recognized, the possibility becomes tenable that individuals possess a series of life narratives pertaining to the specific contexts most relevant to their lives.

From concepts to constructs: a caveat

In moving from the notion that goals and narratives are relevant to understanding contextualized self-representations and towards research in which such context-specific personality characteristics have been directly assessed, we must distinguish between the concepts of current interest and the observable constructs that are measured. I contend that individuals routinely employ context-specific goals and narratives to understand and guide their behaviour in those contexts (although whether and to what extent this is true is an empirical question that should be addressed). These concepts, however, are qualitatively different from the materials generated when such goals and narratives are assessed empirically. Arguing for the importance of life narratives within the generalized personality literature, McAdams (1995) drew a similar distinction, noting that

…when an interviewer asks a person to tell the story of his or her own life, the narrative account that is obtained is not synonymous with the internal life story that is assumed, more or less, to provide that person’s life with some semblance of unity and purpose … a person’s life story is ‘inside’ him or her in the same sense that a trait, motive, or striving is. (p. 385)

Discussing contextualized personality is necessary as the measurement of personality characteristics is almost invariably influenced by the environments in which these characteristics are assessed (e.g. narratives are influenced by the environment in which they are solicited; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010). Given this, it is important to consider whether
context-specific goals and narratives produced at the request of researchers in formal lab settings or even ‘daily diary’ studies do much to illuminate actual personality. For contextualized goals, this concern is alleviated by evidence suggesting that participants tend to delineate their goals into specific contexts, even when they are not explicitly prompted to do so (e.g. Kaiser & Ozer, 1994). For contextualized narratives, this concern is alleviated by recognition of the fact that most personal stories that are produced in situ are highly contextualized in nature. In addition, participants report that approximately 90% of the personal narratives they provide have previously been disclosed to at least one social contact (Thorner, McLean, & Lawrence, 2004), suggesting that, in large part, these narratives exist prior to manifesting in laboratory settings. Thus, I believe that, in the case of context-specific goals and narratives, the ‘winnowing’ (Little, 1999) made from concept to method is no greater than that made during consideration of context-specific traits or goals and narratives within the generalized personality literature.

Context-specific personal goals: nature and implications

In perhaps the first published attempt to examine goals within specific contextualized self-representations, Sheldon and Elliot (2000) assessed context-specific personal goals in a manner aligning with the trait-based assessment of Donahue et al. (1993). Specifically, participants were prompted to list goals they pursued within each of the contexts considered by Donahue et al. Participants then rated these goals along various dimensions (e.g. degree of commitment and difficulty). Sheldon and Elliot noted that the goal appraisal dimensions of these context-specific goals differed systematically across self-representations. For example, participants’ goals as ‘friends’ tended to be rated as less difficult than their goals as ‘students’. This suggests that there exists systematic variability in the evaluation of context-specific goals. It does not, however, directly address whether the contents of the goals themselves vary systematically among contextualized self-representations.

Recently, we (Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2014) attempted to address this prospect. We prompted two community samples of adults to list goals they typically pursued in professional and personal contexts (domains tapping contextualized professional and relational self-representations, respectively). To quantify these qualitative goals, we drew upon Bakan’s (1966) theorizing regarding the ‘duality of human existence’, agency (i.e. getting ahead) and communion (i.e. getting along; Hogan, 1982). Together, these constructs have been deemed sufficient to characterize personality characteristics within a number of assessment paradigms, including those pertinent to characteristics found at the second and third levels of McAdams’ (1995) model (Wiggins, 2003). We coded goals for the presence/absence of themes of agency (e.g. ‘make sure my employees respect me’ and ‘impress people I meet’) and communion (e.g. ‘maintain harmony with coworkers’ and ‘always try to be fair and caring when interacting with my husband’) and tabulated the frequencies of these themes of agency and communion within professional and relational self-representations.

Sociological research has noted that interpersonal relations in professional contexts stimulate dominance and competition whereas relational contexts are characterized by cooperation and caring (e.g. Sennett, 1998). Given the conceptual overlap between dominance/agency and cooperation/communion, we predicted and found that individuals tended to produce goals that exhibited greater focus on agency and reduced focus on communion, within the professional context relative to the relational context, and vice versa. Taken together, these studies align with the proposal that the ‘self as agent’ (McAdams, 2013) varies systematically (and meaningfully) across contextualized self-representations.4

The preceding discussion provided some indication of normative shifts in goals as a function of context, but what of individual differences in the tendency to possess varied goals across contexts? Shifting from description to prediction, we (Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2013) also used these samples to revisit the question of whether inter-contextual variability in personality characteristics is related to well-being, by considering intra-individual contextual variability in the content of participants’ goals. In part, we attempted to test two competing views regarding the nature of the self. One view, steeped in postmodern theory, posits that there is benefit associated with continuously modifying the self to meet external demand (Gergen, 1991). The other, in contrast, posits that there is benefit associated with consistency of self across contexts (Lecky, 1945). Given that goals are generally considered most adaptively situated within specific contexts, we predicted that intra-individual contextual variability in these motivational units would correlate positively with well-being.

To test this prediction, we regressed standard deviations (across contextualized self-representations) of each of our frequency counts of agency and communion goals onto the associated means and means squared (analogous to Baird et al., 2006) and averaged the resulting residuals to produce a single indicator of inter-contextual variability in goal content.5 Inter-contextual variability in goal content was moderately positively correlated (e.g. r = .25) with well-being; the more varied participants’ goals were across their contextualized self-representations, the higher their reported levels of well-being.

Context-specific life narratives: nature and implications

Despite widespread recognition that the narratives individuals construct and disclose in their day-to-day lives are highly contextualized (McLean et al., 2007), the amount of empirical research that has directly assessed narratives pertaining to specific contextualized self-representations is painfully small. Nonetheless, our research team (Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2013; Dunlop et al., 2014) has found that, when prompted to

4In addition to these normative trends, we also noted a moderate degree of rank-order consistency in motivational levels across contexts (e.g. levels of goal-based agency were significantly correlated across contexts).

5Reduction of inter-contextual variability in several personality characteristics to a single value is the most common approach within the contextualized personality trait literature (irrespective of whether the measure of Baird et al., 2006, is adopted). To enable direct parallels between inter-contextual variability at the goal and narrative levels of personality and the trait level, we followed suit.
do so, individuals across the adult lifespan are capable of generating several memories pertaining to specific contexts (e.g. as a ‘friend’) that they recognize as emotionally meaningful and relevant to self-understanding (Moffitt & Singer, 1994). Analogous to our research on context-specific goals, we examined whether narrative content varied systematically across these contexts and, furthermore, whether this variability corresponded with well-being. Doing so required quantifying our participants’ qualitative autobiographical narratives. To do this, we tabulated frequencies of words and phrases within these narratives that represented themes of agency and communion. As was the case with our context-specific goals, narratives pertaining to professional self-representations tended to have higher frequencies of words and phrases embodying themes of agency, relative to communion, and vice versa (Dunlop et al., 2014).

In the interest of determining whether individual variability in these frequencies was associated with well-being, we used the measure of Baird et al. (2006) to derive the degrees of inter-contextual variability in the agentic and communal themes in participants’ narratives (i.e. we regressed the standard deviation (across contextualized self-representations) of each of our agency and communion measures onto the associated means and means squared and averaged the resulting residuals). Given the proposal that life narratives are most adaptive when they incorporate diverse experiences and characterological elements into a coherent, consistent plot that reflects a unified sense of self that can foster well-being (Baerger & McAdams, 1999; McAdams, 1995), we predicted and found that inter-contextual variability in participants’ narratives was correlated negatively (e.g. $r = -.23$) with well-being (even while accounting for the word length of participants’ narratives); the less varied participants stories were across contextualized self-representations, the greater their reported levels of well-being.

**From concepts to constructs: a second caveat**

I contend that goals and narratives elicited in lab settings possess substantial relevance to the contextualized self-representations people hold spontaneously and, by extension, relevance to how individuals conceive of, and live out, their lives within their various domains and roles. We must consider, however, whether the act of eliciting context-specific goals and narratives in research studies itself may influence, or even intervene upon, participants. Research, for example, by Gollwitzer (e.g., Gollwitzer & Brandstätter, 1997; Gollwitzer, Sheeran, Michalski, & Seifert, 2009), has documented that, under some circumstances, the very act of stating a goal is associated with reduced likelihood of its attainment. In contrast, Pennebaker’s research (e.g. Pennebaker & Chung, 2011) strongly suggests that writing narratives about stressful personal experiences positively influences subsequent levels of well-being and health.

For these reasons, we should take seriously the possibility that eliciting context-specific goals and narratives in lab settings influences individuals. In evaluating my own research data (i.e. Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2013; Dunlop et al., 2014), the possibility of ‘assessment-as-intervention’ seems most damning to the associations noted between variability in goal and narrative content across contextualized self-representations and well-being. The threatening nature of this objection, however, is diminished when we consider that, in one of the two studies in which the relation between inter-contextual personality variability and well-being was examined, well-being was assessed 1 month before participants were prompted for context-specific goals and narratives. In this study, approximately 500 participants were first asked to complete a measure of well-being. Those who scored relatively high or low on this measure were subsequently contacted 1 month later and asked to complete contextualized measures of personality characteristics corresponding to the self as actor, agent or author. After quantifying the resulting goal and narrative material, we then compared mean levels of inter-contextual variability between our high-adjustment and low-adjustment groups, noting that the former had higher levels of goal differentiation and lower levels of narrative differentiation than the latter.

Results of the aforementioned study highlight the ways contextualization of goals and narratives can enrich understanding of self-representations and thus personality. Although replication is important, especially using personality characteristics, goals and roles less obviously linked in function, these results are consistent with the notion that, at the trait level, inter-contextual variability in the self-concept is unrelated to well-being; at the goal level, in contrast, it is positively related to well-being; and, finally, at the narrative level, it is negatively related to well-being. Thus, by examining inter-contextual variability in the self-concept at each level of personality, perspectives recognizing the benefit (e.g. Gergen, 1991) and cost (e.g. Lecky, 1945) of such variability were reconciled. One might go on to hypothesize that well-being is fostered when people pursue motivations appropriate for specific contexts, while creating narratives about their experiences in these contexts that are consistent with one another.

**Interplay among traits, goals and life stories**

If self-representations contain contextualized personality traits, goals and life narratives, then an area ripe for further discussion concerns the nature of their inter-relations. This topic gets at the very heart of the nature of personality, contextualized or otherwise, and, for that reason, falls within the purview of the current work. In what follows, I address relations among traits, goals and life narratives within both contextualized and generalized self-representations (I conceive of the relations among traits, goals and narratives as comparable within contextualized and generalized self-representations). I argue that, although the variables defining

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6Although self-defining memories themselves represent far cries from full life narratives (e.g. McAdams, 2008), these memories have been deemed pertinent to understanding such narratives (McAdams, 1995). Thus, requesting self-defining memories is a relatively economical option for researchers wishing to assess a central aspect of more expansive contextual life narratives.

7Possibly, declaration alone leads individuals to believe that they have progressed towards completion, thereby reducing impetus to invest actual effort in the applicable goal (Hudson & Fraley, 2015).
the three levels of personality are distinct, they come to influence one another in nontrivial ways. ‘Relations’ and ‘influence’ can, of course, be interpreted from various perspectives, or ‘meta-theories’ (Overton, 2006). One meta-theory is predicated on the belief that it is most appropriate to decompose the person into a series of distinct, foundational personality characteristics. From this ‘split’ (Overton, 2006) vantage, traits, goals and narratives are most meaningfully examined independently (i.e. consideration of their relations is not necessary for adequate understanding of any one of these constructs). Another approach, however, is to view personality characteristics as constructs with permeable boundaries. From this ‘relational’ (Overton, 2006) vantage, the person ‘is not an aggregate of discrete elements, but an organized and self-organizing system of parts, each part being defined by its relation to other parts and to the whole’ (p. 32). As an example of the richness inherent in research undertaken in the spirit of relationalism (and evidence against the viability of the split meta-theory), Walker, Frimer, and Dunlop (2010) examined the personality compositions associated with heightened prosocial behaviour. Participants in this study, who had received national awards recognizing highly prosocial behaviour, completed an exhaustive personality assessment procedure that addressed each of McAdams’ (1995, 2013) three conceptual levels. These researchers subjected the data to cluster analysis, wherein the person represented the unit of analysis and distinct ‘clusters’ of participants were identified based on similarity in the compositions of participants’ personality characteristics. Walker and colleagues noted three clusters of personality compositions in this highly prosocial sample (one cluster possessed heightened levels of variables representing socio-cognitive maturity, another heightened levels of communal variables and the third, a relatively ordinary personality composition). This discovery would not have been possible had the authors analysed their data using a methodology consistent with a split meta-theory. Conceiving of the person in a manner consistent with relationalism calls into question the viability of outlining independent personality characteristics and simple cause–effect relations among them (Overton & Reese, 1973; cf. McCrae, 1996). Rather, these characteristics are viewed as inseparable; understanding of any one characteristic demands consideration of the person as a whole.

While relationalism may offer important richness, personality assessment and analysis are much more tractable using the split approach. The approach has, thus, tended to dominate our field, despite repeated appearance of analytic anomalies that underscore its limitations. Research examining inter-relations among variables at different personality levels is no exception. In addition, this research is primarily nonexperimental, making directions of influence difficult to establish. Nevertheless, evidence from this work is consistent with the presence of mutual influence across personality levels, and I present relational interpretations in the following, by first considering the influence of narratives on goals and traits, then that of goals on narratives and traits and finally that of traits on goals and narratives. After outlining these relations, I discuss relations between contextualized self-representations and the generalized self-representation.

**Life narratives and personality dynamics**

Life narratives have long been conceived as moulding our ‘character and personal style’ (Sarbin, 2004, p. 7) on both immediate and long-term developmental scales (e.g. Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; Levin, 1970; Pals, 2006). The notion that life narratives influence ‘character and personal style’ is also reflected in the writing of Giddens (1991), who argued that, once formed, there is impetus to keep our narratives ‘going’. From this vantage, content of life narratives is reflected in goals pursued on daily and long-term bases, as well as perceived dispositional styles. If, for example, someone envisions his or her romantic history (narrative) as converging towards marriage, then immediate and long-term goals pursued in this domain will tend to be congruent with its prospect. Alternatively, if the personal narrative that peaks with subsequent marriage seems, for whatever reason, no longer appropriate, the narrator may revise his or her romantic goals accordingly. Similarly, if the most salient autobiographical narratives one possesses are heavily predicated on being extraverted, than one may come to associate this disposition even more readily with the self and, consequently, behave in a more extraverted manner (McLean et al., 2007).

Consistent with this theorizing, Pals (2006) noted that levels of positive resolution in participants’ narratives (operationalized as the degree to which participants’ stories of difficult experiences were well formed and ended positively with a sense of emotional closure and resolution) accounted for increases in ego resiliency between young adulthood and midlife (see also Lodi-Smith, Geise, Roberts, & Robins, 2009; Sutin & Robins, 2005).

Narratives have also been found to influence traits and goals on more dynamic and micro levels. Pasupathi, Alderman, and Shaw (2007), for example, asked participants to play a novel computer game while observed by familiar others (e.g. friends). Following this exercise, participants and observers (i.e. the friends) rated the players’ game skill. Each pair was then instructed to describe the game-playing experience collaboratively to a third party. Pasupathi and colleagues noted a positive relation between observers’ involvement in constructing these stories (which included disagreements) and changes in players’ subsequent self-evaluations of game expertise (assessed independently following story production). Thus, in this study, modification to players’ narratives (via observers’ involvement in the story-telling process) resulted in modification of these players’ trait-based self-representations (pertaining to their skills in this game), assessed shortly thereafter. In addition to the influence collaborating on a narrative may have on subsequent trait-based perceptions, within social and personality psychology, prompting for certain types of narratives is a common strategy to influence state-based personality characteristics (e.g. Ekman, Levenson, & Friesen, 1983). Tracy and Robins (2007), for example, have noted that requesting that participants describe narratives about instances in which they felt proud about themselves leads to heightened levels of state-based pride.
Goals and personality dynamics
Among psychologists, theorists and laypersons alike, belief is widespread that the goals we adopt influence our behaviours and construals (Bauer & McAdams, 2010; Linder, 2009). Indeed, goals have been thought to influence ‘entire patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior’ (Grant & Dweck, 1999, p. 358), and empirical research in this area generally supports this assertion. First, the goals and motives one has in a given situation influence the personal narratives disclosed (e.g. Dudukovic, Marsh, & Tversky, 2004; Woike, 1995). For example, someone who has the goal of entertaining others will recount an autobiographical experience differently than someone who has the goal of veracity and completeness (Dudukovic et al., 2004). Disclosing personal experiences in a particular way, in turn, can shape the way the narrator later remembers the experience (Higgins & Rholes, 1978; McGregor & Holmes, 1999) and incorporates it into his or her life narratives (McLean et al., 2007; Pasupathi, 2007).

Examining this process indirectly, Higgins and Rholes (1978) provided participants with a description of a target individual. Participants were instructed to convey information (stories) about this target to an unseen confederate depicted as either liking or disliking this target, to aid the confederate in identifying this person. Participants tended to distort information about the target in a manner aligning with the confederate’s presumed target evaluation and, several weeks later, mistakenly believed that this distorted information was part of the source material they had been given. In a more direct examination of this process, McGregor and Holmes (1999, Study 4) prompted participants to provide narratives regarding a recent interpersonal incident with a friend that had made them feel ‘hurt, upset or angered’. These narratives, however, were to be written from the perspective of either the participants’ own ‘lawyer’ (wherein self-serving biases were encouraged and the friend was to be construed as fully at fault) or a neutral third party. Eight weeks later, participants who wrote from the perspective of their ‘lawyers’ reported being significantly more upset about this interpersonal event, relative to those who wrote about this event from the perspective of neutral third parties. Thus, although the disclosure process shapes the manner in which narratives and memories are stored, these disclosure processes themselves are often influenced by the immediate and long-term goals of the narrator.

In a parallel manner, goals pursued in day-to-day life have been hypothesized to influence trait expression. Little (2008) offered the notion of ‘free traits’ to represent the phenomenon whereby an individual engages in behavioural patterns that belie dispositional aspects of his or her personality in the interest of achieving larger goals. This tendency, for goals to override natural behavioural tendencies reflected in traits, can manifest in many ways. For example, introverts ‘may act as extraverts in order to advance projects requiring expressions of enthusiastic assertiveness’ (p. 1235) or even just to meet requirements of roles they wish to fill (e.g. in the interest of furthering her or his career, an otherwise introverted academic may strive to be social and network at a professional conference). Little suggested that this tendency offers at least partial explanation for incongruences between the traits an individual ‘possesses’ and the manner in which he or she may behave in a given context.

The notion that goals account for an individual’s behaviour in specific circumstances is also present in Fleeson’s (2012) whole-trait circumstances. Within this theory, traits are parsed into descriptive and explanatory components. The descriptive component is the density distribution of states (i.e. magnitude and variability in behaviours across situations). The explanatory component, in contrast, is constituted by the mechanisms or causes of these states. Among these mechanisms, goals have been signalled as particularly important (McCabe & Fleeson, 2012). Consistent with the proposal that goals influence trait expression, using an experience sampling procedure, McCabe and Fleeson (2012) found that the goals participants pursued in particular situations accounted for variability in behaviours corresponding to extraversion (e.g. pursuit of goals they labelled extraverted, such as ‘trying to connect with people’ and ‘trying to be the center of attention’, related to exhibition of extraverted behaviours).

Might this tendency for goals to influence traits represent an adaptive strategy? Little (2008) cautioned against painting this tendency in either exclusively adaptive or maladaptive hues. Rather, he suggested that, although pursuit of personal goals can lead to flourishing, accentuation of beneficial traits and remediation of weaknesses, working against our natural tendencies can often be deleterious (such as when an introvert pursues many social goals), thereby leading to diminished levels of well-being, life satisfaction, personal authenticity and even physical health (thus, he suggested the importance of also experiencing situations and environments consistent with our dispositional tendencies, wherein we can ‘re-charge’).

Shifting from expression in immediate contexts to developmental processes, Little (2008) proposed that, over time, expressed free traits could lead to sustained personological change (see also Bauer & McAdams, 2010). Research by Hudson and Fraley (2015) is consistent with this notion. These researchers prompted upper-division college students at the beginning of a 16-week term to rate, on a Likert-type scale, their degrees of motivation to change certain traits. Across two studies, they observed that desires to change tended to correspond with subsequent changes in self-reported traits. For example, the degree to which individuals exhibited desire to increase extraversion corresponded with increases in perceived (i.e. self-reported) levels of extraversion throughout the term.

Traits and personality dynamics
Traits have been conceived as causally related to a host of outcomes and additional personality characteristics, including narratives and goals (e.g. McCabe & Fleeson, 2012). Despite this theorizing, the number of empirical efforts examining traits in relation to goals, or traits in relation to stories, is relatively modest. Nevertheless, the research that has been conducted tends to align with the notion that traits influence the nature of our narratives and goals. For example, individuals reporting high levels of openness to experience
tend to provide more structurally complex autobiographical narratives (a component of narrative distinct from content; McAdams et al., 2004) and to endorse aesthetic personal goals (e.g. ‘Become an accomplished musician’), whereas those indicating high levels of agreeableness tend to produce narratives concerning social matters (e.g. friendship) and endorse more social goals (e.g. ‘Helping others in need’; McAdams et al., 2004; Roberts & Robins, 2000). Underscoring the dynamic relation between personality traits and autobiographical narratives, Santittoso, Kunda, and Fong (1990) found that people led to believe that they possessed a certain trait tended to proffer autobiographical narratives that described behaviours consistent with this trait. Thus, individuals’ perceptions of their traits are implicated in the types of narratives they produce (if only in the lab).

Interplay between contextualized and generalized self-representations

Given evidence of functional relations among traits, goals and stories within both generalized and contextualized self-representations, it is timely to ponder the nature of interplay between contextualized and generalized self-representations themselves. After all, in some manner, the contextualized and generalized conceptions of personality are contradictory, in that one is specific to context, while the other presumably develops an overall consistency through its contextual experiences. Yet both appear viable. How is this so?

Based on previous research and theorizing on this topic (Donahue & Harary, 1998; McConnell, 2011; Wood & Roberts, 2006), I contend that contextualized and generalized self-representations are hierarchically related, representing different degrees of breadth. At the highest level of this hierarchy, personality is generalized, reflecting general characteristics and functions. More narrowly, personalities exists as a series of contextualized self-representations, reflecting personal nuances specific to roles and situations. These contextualized self-representations are ‘nested’ within the generalized self-representation (Wood & Roberts, 2006, p. 783). Within each of these self-representations, there exists a composition of personality traits, personal goals and life narratives.

Evoking words such as ‘hierarchically’ and ‘nested’ may lead to inference that what I propose here is a model wherein influence is unidirectional, with aspects of the generalized self-representation carrying downstream implications for contextualized self-representations. Although I do contend that the content of generalized self-representations comes to influence that of the contextualized self-representations, I also contend the opposite—these self-representations are mutually influential. Indeed, following the theorizing of Wood and Roberts (2006), (i) the generalized self-representation is believed responsible for communalities exhibited across contextualized self-representations (social roles are, after all, the spheres in which personal inclinations and social expectations come to their heads; Stryker, 2007) and (ii) adaptations in contextualized self-representations often mediate relations between changes in social roles (e.g. becoming a parent and accepting a leadership position) and development of the generalized self-concept (e.g. Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006).

Furthermore, application of a multilevel conception of personality at the contextualized and generalized levels of self-representation may help elucidate the nature of personality characteristics falling under the purview of this model. For example, consideration of the generalized life narrative may account for individual differences in the manner in which experiences are stored within specific domains. Consider an individual who, at the generalized level, is highly extraverted, constantly pursuing agentic ends (e.g. ‘influence others’ and ‘always be the boss’) and prone to creating personal narratives heavily emphasizing self-assertion and dominance. We can expect that these characteristics will come to influence the nature of this individual’s contextualized self-representations. As an example, relative to his or her peers, in any given role (e.g. ‘student’) he or she might have a heightened level of extraversion. We can also expect, however, that changes to these contextualized representations may “feedback” and come to influence the generalized self-representation. Suppose, for example, this individual becomes involved in a committed romantic relationship. Given that this social role is highly communal in nature, his or her ‘romantic partner’ self-representation will likely become more communal than his or her generalized self-representation (owing to the highly agentic nature of the latter). Over time, however, this new communal orientation should influence the traits, goals and narratives associated with the generalized self-representation. By adopting a new, largely communal role (and corresponding traits, goals and narratives), the composition of contextualized self-representations changes, and the new composition can influence traits, goals and narratives associated with the generalized self-representation.

Despite its focus on traits, Wood and Roberts’ (2006) Personality and Role Identity Structure Model is instructive in further fleshing out the relations between contextualized and generalized self-representations at the three conceptual levels of personality. Among other useful assertions, Wood and Roberts proposed that role-bound experiences influence the traits most prominent in the applicable contextualized self-representation(s) to greater degrees than those of either other contextualized self-representations or generalized self-representations. One implication of this proposal is that contextualized self-representation(s) can limit potentially deleterious effects of a negative experience (e.g. performing poorly at work) on self-representations in other contexts (e.g. as a mother) as well as the generalized self-representation (which includes beliefs about overall competence; e.g. Roberts & Donahue, 1994).8

A second proposal of the Personality and Role Identity Structure Model is that context-specific predictors should be more strongly associated with relevant role-bound outcome variables than with more general ones, or those of other roles. Evidence for this “bandwidth–fidelity trade-off” (Roberts & Donahue, 1994, p. 199) has been noted by various research groups (e.g. Bing, Whanger, Davison, &

8There are limits to this capacity, as reactions may ‘spill over’ across contextualized self-representations and to the generalized self-representation.
VanHook, 2004; Slatcher & Vazire, 2009). Roberts and Donahue (1994), for example, observed that generalized self-reports of competence correlated modestly with individuals’ satisfaction at work. Competence ratings of the ‘worker’ self-representation, in contrast, correlated strongly with this outcome variable, whereas the degree of competence corresponding to the ‘romantic partner’ self-representation was not significantly related to this outcome variable (although the authors did not determine the significance of the difference between the correlations).

There is reason to suppose that analogous relations exist at the additional levels of personality. For example, performing poorly at work may impact goals and narratives surrounding the ‘worker’ self-representation (e.g. this person may look for a different job, while crafting a ‘face-saving’ narrative wherein initial enthusiasm for the job soured and poor performance resulted from alienation) to a greater degree than self-representations surrounding other contexts such as family relationships as well as the generalized self-representation.

PART IV: SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

My intent here was to work to unite two rather disparate areas of research. The first of these areas, the contextualized approach to personality, takes as a starting point the fact that individuals perceive their personalities to vary as functions of context or role. Investigations of this phenomenon have traditionally taken the form of prompting participants for ratings of their traits in specific contexts (e.g. as a ‘friend’ and ‘mother’), examining how their ratings vary across roles and how this variability relates to different outcome variables (e.g. Donahue et al., 1993; Fukushima & Hosoe, 2011). In such studies, negative relations have repeatedly been noted between inter-contextual trait variability and well-being. More recently, however, the magnitude of these relations has been recognized as the product of a methodological artefact (Baird et al., 2006), and, when this artefact is controlled, relations between inter-contextual trait variability and well-being typically diminish to nonsignificant levels. This revelation has largely stunted the contextualized personality literature. I hope this article can re-energize this literature by drawing from research on personality in its generalized form. Generalized personality is commonly conceptualized to include two additional ‘levels’ beyond traits, manifest in terms of goals and life narratives (McAdams, 1995). Acknowledging these additional levels has offered more complete pictures of certain psychological processes (e.g. Manczak et al., 2014) and personality–outcome associations (e.g., Dunlop, 2013; Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2013).

I suggested that consideration of goals and life narratives may inform understanding of personality in its contextualized forms too. This suggestion was buttressed by a review of the limited empirical research that has assessed goals and life narratives within specific roles and contexts (e.g. Dunlop, Walker, & Wiens, 2013; Dunlop et al., 2014; Sheldon & Elliot, 2000). I made a case for their importance, through consideration of the nature and implications of goal and narrative inter-contextual variability. I next fleshed out relations among personality characteristics across conceptual levels (within both contextualized and generalized self-representations). Adopting a relational meta-theory (Overton, 2006), I argued that traits, goals and life narratives are mutually constituted and that understanding of one of these personality levels requires assessment of all. I next elaborated relations between contextualized and generalized self-representations, recognizing that contextualized self-representations are nested within the generalized self-representation (Wood & Roberts, 2006). Thus, just as the study of generalized personality has benefitted greatly from moving beyond trait models and towards broader frameworks, so too would the study of contextualized personality. Furthermore, both generalized and contextualized literatures would benefit from greater integration and cross-talk. Doing otherwise belies the complexities of our very natures.

Limitations and future directions

Where might this multilevel approach to contextualized personality research go? Arguably, the most viable undertaking would be focused on furthering understanding concerning the extent to, and manner by which, these contextualized self-representations emerge and develop across the lifespan (Harter, 1999; Proulx & Chandler, 2009). Specifically, there is reason to suspect that consideration of goals and life narratives may offer insights regarding emergence and development of contextualized self-representations and long-term personality development.

Rathbone, Moulin, and Conway (2008) examined autobiographical narratives associated with a series of social roles. These researchers noted general correspondence between the ages of these stories and the periods in time in which the specific roles became relevant to participants. That is, participants’ self-defining narratives about social roles commonly corresponded with the times the applicable role identities were adopted (e.g. when the participant first became an employee), rather than later in these roles’ histories. This finding suggests that creation of context-specific narrative details may be a precursor to development of the associated self-representations. Said differently, one may need to accumulate a critical mass of autobiographical detail corresponding to a given role before this role is represented in the cognitive structure of the self and available for both narrative articulation and goal and trait development.

Another topic amenable to future research concerns examination of the possibility that specific types of goals and narratives, be they context specific or otherwise, may have differing relations with outcome variables. For example, because of expectations associated with professional and personal roles, themes of dominance and assertiveness within one’s narratives as a professional (e.g. as an ‘employee’) may relate positively with adjustment, whereas this same thematic content surrounding one’s relational self-representations (e.g. as a ‘friend’) may relate negatively to adjustment. The common practice of summing levels of themes across collections of various types of
narratives (e.g. calculating the frequency of a given theme without distinguishing ‘high points’, ‘low points’ and ‘turning points’ in life stories), however, would mask these different relations.

Third, researchers are encouraged to delve deeper into the processes and functions of goals and narratives within contextualized self-representations. In this article and the corresponding literature, for example, a predominant focus has been exhibited on goal content, yet, there exists several other aspects of contextualized goals that deserve attention in future research, such as goal disengagement processes (Shah, 2005) and participants’ evaluations of their goals themselves (e.g. importance and enjoyment; Emmons, 1999). Researchers should also examine the relation between well-being and inter-contextual variability in goal and narrative content further, as it remains unclear whether this relation is causal in nature. Throughout this article, I have implicitly endorsed the notion that there is something adaptive about possessing a collection of goals that are thematically dissimilar, and a collection of narratives that are thematically similar, across contexts. This position aligns with the possibility that well-being will be enhanced if such a composition of goals and narratives is adopted. Despite this orientation, however, the alternative possibility (i.e. that well-being comes to influence the composition of goals and narratives) also carries certain appeal and should be considered with equal enthusiasm.

The notion, however, that there is something adaptive about maintaining contextualized goals and narratives must be coupled with an important caveat. Although these goals and narratives have been often associated with a host of adaptive outcomes including well-being and a sense of self-continuity (Chandler et al., 2003; Dunlop, Walker, & Matsuba, 2015), they are also implicated in a series of processes and outcomes decidedly maladaptive in nature (e.g. Bresin, Gordon, Bender, Gordon, & Joiner, 2010). Narratives, for example, often serve as effective tools to justify maintaining ‘bad habits’ and avoiding addressing problems, and behaviour, that may be morally suspect (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wortman, 1990; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). In future, a more even-handed framing of contextualized goals and narratives should be sought.

In the spirit of the preceding discussion, researchers should also work to examine contextualized goals and narratives in relation to a more varied pallet of outcome variables. Well-being is certainly important. There are, however, other aspects of psychological functioning that are relevant to understanding the self in its contextualized and generalized forms. King (2001), for example, argued that the ‘good life’ is represented by both happiness (e.g. well-being) and maturity (e.g. ego development; Loevinger, 1976)—two constructs that are empirically and conceptually distinct. Variables corresponding to facets of psychosocial maturity demand greater attention in subsequent research. Furthermore, beyond psychological functioning, researchers should look to examine contextualized goals and narratives in relation to objective behaviours and life outcomes (be they positive or negative in nature).

Just as the palette of personality characteristics considered within contextualized self-representations should be expanded to include the three conceptual levels outlined here, researchers should also expand assessment of contextualized self-representations beyond those pertaining to social roles, McConnell (2011), for example, noted that, when individuals are asked to generate such representations, many representations correspond to contexts or domains that are orthogonal to social roles (e.g. the ‘real’ me, the ‘old’ me or when I’m upset). Although I have focused on social roles when discussing the nature of contextualized self-representations, my theorizing may be applied to contextualized self-representations in other areas. In future, it would be beneficial to adopt more opened-ended assessment procedures, allowing participants to make known the ways they contextualize their lives.

Keeping with the theme of methodological improvements, the irony has not escaped me that I have written at length concerning the need to assess the three levels of personality in a contextualized manner, yet my own research has relied on procedures in which participants are asked to provide personality characteristics corresponding to various contexts in a single, largely decontextualized setting (e.g. having participants list goals simply pertaining to their professional and personal lives). Despite benefits accrued through adoption of this perspective, ‘integrative and transdisciplinary’ (Little, 1999, p. 85) methods are needed. In future, for example, researchers should assess contextualized goals and narratives in real time, via the experience sampling method. Participants could be prompted at various points throughout the day for lists of context-bound goals they are pursuing at those moments and narratives relevant to their current situations (and associated self-representations). In the interest of addressing the predominantly nonexperimental nature of research examining relations between variables functioning at the various levels of personality, this work should be coupled with greater emphasis on experimental research examining inter-relations among variables at each level of personality, and within generalized and contextualized self-representations. For example, researchers may wish to explore the viability of intervening upon participants’ goals in the interest of enacting desired changes in traits (Hudson & Fraley, 2015). Alternatively, researchers may wish to explore the viability of modifying the content and structure of individuals’ life narratives in the interest of boosting certain adaptive traits (e.g. conscientiousness; Dunlop & Tracy, 2013). Indeed, alongside shifts in social roles themselves (Roberts & Wood, 2006), changes in goals and narratives may help explain the normative development of traits across the lifespan. Incorporating such an experimental focus would allow for firmer conclusions to be drawn concerning the casual relations among these variables.

In this article, I focused on individuals’ perceptions of their personality characteristics within specific contexts and in general. This choice was undertaken owing to the following: (i) precedents set by past research examining contextualized personality and (ii) numerous advantages associated with self-report measures. Despite these advantages, however, exclusive consideration of individuals’ own construals of their personalities will take us only so far in understanding the relation between personality and context. These
Construals correspond to individuals’ recognition of the manners in which their personalities manifest but are largely silent concerning the manners in which these personalities may vary across contexts in ways that individuals themselves are unaware. To supplement the focus on self-report methods here, future research in the area of contextualized personality should make use of a wide array of assessment procedures, including informant (i.e., other) report as well as observational measures (although certain variables, such as individuals’ internal and evolving life narratives, are not capable of assessment via these additional assessment procedures—at least not in the same sense in which traits may be tapped by such procedures).

At various points in this article, I have considered the possibility that prompting participants for context-specific traits, goals and narratives may be more akin to psychological intervention rather than assessment. The notion that, in situ, goals and narratives are largely contextual has been addressed, as has the possibility that the relation noted between well-being and variability in the goal and narrative content of contextualized self-representations is an artefact of the assessment procedure itself. It, however, falls to future researchers to examine more thoroughly the potential influences on self-representations, and the behaviour and outcome states exerted by prompting participants to rate their traits, list their goals and produce self-relevant narratives.

Conclusions and one last pitch for relationalism

Another valuable addition to the contextualized personality literature, and the field of personality psychology more broadly, would be adoption of a relational meta-theory (Overton, 2006). We are, after all, people rather than variables; doing justice to the complexity of our natures requires recognition of the person as a whole rather than as a collection of disparate personality characteristics. A shift in the unit of analysis away from the variable and towards the ‘person’ (Magnusson, 2003) is required for a more complete understanding of the manner in which both contextualized and general traits, goals and narratives relate to each other within persons. Thus, appreciation for relationalism coupled with recognition of the contextualized nature of personality demands simultaneous assessment of traits, goals and narratives in their generalized and contextualized forms (see also Wood, 2007).

Although understanding of any single personality characteristic requires recognition of the whole, an exciting objective for future research concerns entertaining the possibility that there exists variability in the degree to which traits, goals and narratives, in their contextualized and generalized forms, are important for individuals’ sense of self (Dunlop & Walker, in press). For some, the self may be known primarily in the form of context-specific narratives. For others, in contrast, this self may be primarily known in a series of generalized trait terms. In addition, specific contextualized self-representations such as family and professional social roles or awareness of how one has changed over time may vary in relevance to individuals (Brown & McConnell, 2009). Sensitivity to these possibilities will lead to a more nuanced, and complete, assessment of personality as well as correspondence between traits, goals and narratives and self-concepts.

Finally, it is worth revisiting the pragmatic nature of adoption of McAdams’ (1995) framework for an understanding of contextualized personality. This multilevel conception of personality represents one of the most conceptually rich models available to us. This, however, does not mean that it is incapable of being improved. Researchers, for example, should remain open to the possibility that there exist additional personality levels (e.g., Sheldon, Cheng, & Hilpert, 2011). We should also remain vigilant in considering the manners in which the personalities we possess come to transact with and influence the lives we lead, and the contexts in which we lead them. Doing so with sensitivity to contextualized and general self-representations will no doubt enhance understanding of the person in all of his or her varied manifestations.

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