To cite this chapter:

Kuppens, P. (2020). Personality dynamics. In V. Zeigler-Hill & T. K. Shackelford (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of personality and individual differences*. Springer.

Title: Personality dynamics

Author: Peter Kuppens

Affiliation: KU Leuven-University of Leuven (Belgium)

Synonyms: Personality processes, idiographic personality

Definition: The patterns and regularities with which personality-related thoughts, feelings, and behavior fluctuate across time and interact with the environment

Word count: 1534 (total)

The concept of personality as a collection of stable immutable traits that characterize and determine our behavior, feelings, and thoughts across time and contexts has long been replaced by a concept of personality as a system of processes and mechanisms that continuously prepare, interact, and respond to an individual's environment, creating characteristic ways with which individuals navigate their world (Mischel & Shoda, 1998). The inherent context-specific nature of these interactions gives rise to considerable within-person variation in behavior. As elucidated by the seminal work of Fleeson (e.g., Fleeson, 2004), the personality of an individual can be captured in the form of a multivariate distribution that expresses the habitual tendency and range of its behavior across situations on a number of key dimensions. The main challenge for personality psychology then is to explain this variation and reconcile it with the notion of personality stability.

Of course, the observed within-person distribution of behavior does not reflect noise but in actual fact reflects the fact that personality-related behavior, thoughts, and feelings continuously fluctuate as a response of internal and external, context-driven factors. The patterns and regularities that characterize these fluctuations reflect the temporal dynamics of personality. What are these patterns and regularities, how can they be studied, and what do they teach us about personality?

What are patterns and regularities worthy of theoretical and empirical attention? A cake can be cut in multiple ways but one meaningful distinction is between first temporal properties of elements of personality itself and second how they interact with the world (see the definition of personality dynamics offered by Oxford dictionary "1) the way elements of a person's personality interact with each other, and 2) the active adaptation, whether conscious or unconscious, of one's personality to one's environment", Personality Dynamics, 2017).

When it comes to internal dynamics, one can consider the dynamics of single elements of personality such as behaviors, thoughts, and feelings (cfr. the cognitive affective units in Mischel's personality system and overt behavior; Mischel, Shoda, & Ayduk, 2007). How variable (as expressed in a measure of dispersion like the Standard Deviation), unstable (as expressed in a measure of size of consecutive jumps, like the Mean Squared Successive Distance), and autocorrelated (as expressed in the correlation of a variable with a time-lagged version of itself) these elements are provide valuable information on the extremity, rigidity, and flexibility of the personality system, which is directly relevant for understanding adaptive and maladaptive personality functioning. When it comes to feelings, for instance, a wealth of research has shown that people vary considerably in these parameters, and that such differences are highly relevant for their mental health (Houben, Van den Noortgate, & Kuppens, 2015). Additionally, one can consider the dynamics of multiple elements. A first relevant question in this respect is that of the within-person *structure of personality*. While most efforts have focused on uncovering the structure of personality across individuals, an equally important and non-redundant question is what the structure of personality looks like within individuals and how this may possibly differ between people (Cervone, 2005). A second question pertains to how elements of personality interact and mutually influence or predict each other across time (so-called *personality processes*). This in fact comes down to making concrete the CAPS theory framework formulated by Mischel in which personality is conceptualized as a system of cognitive and affective units that mutually interact, reinforce or inhibit one another to determine behavioral

responses (Mischel, et al., 2007). For instance current network approaches to personality offer the empirical tools to study such dynamic personality processes (e.g., Cramer et al., 2012).

Of course our thoughts, feelings and behaviors do not arise in a vacuum but take place in response or anticipation of (outside) events. This second, external aspect of personality dynamics involves how cognitive-affective units and the ensuing behaviors are activated and inhibited as a function of contextual factors, and how this takes shape in different individuals. This has been the primary aim of so-called interactionist efforts in personality research, aiming to delineate how behavior is a function of the mutual interplay between the person and the situation (e.g., Cervone, 2005; Mischel & Shoda, 1998; Vansteelandt & Van Mechelen, 1998), but is or should in fact be one of the main aspirations of psychology as a whole (Lewin, 1935).

How can personality dynamics be studied? By definition, studying temporal dynamics requires intensive longitudinal data, in which personality (processes) are observed or measured over multiple time-points and contexts. Lab paradigms (e.g., Fleeson & Law, 2015) and mobile technology (e.g., Mehl & Connor, 2012) offer excellent tools to collect such data in controlled environments as well as in the context of everyday life. The resulting data is of a relatively complex nature, involving information of multiple individuals across multiple time-points with respect to multiple variables. With the rising interest in dynamics in many fields, a multitude of statistical techniques and modeling approaches has become available for studying the temporal dynamics of personality related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, their interactions, and their contingencies with events and context (for recent overviews, see e.g., Hamaker, Ceulemans, Grasman, & Tuerlinckx, 2015; Hamaker & Wichers, 2017; Hofmans, De Clercq, Kuppens, Verbeke, & Widiger, in press).

What can be learned from studying these dynamic properties of personality? Several elements that are crucial for the understanding of the nature of personality have already been mentioned, such as insight into (individual differences in) the within-person structure of personality, insight into the exact functioning of personality processes over time, the ensuing person-situation

interactions that create behavioral profiles over time, etc. In addition, the study of personality dynamics can help to answer several vexing questions. For one, it can help to understand how personality dynamics and stability can be reconciled. While surely the nature of personality related thoughts feeling and behaviors is not stable but variable across time, persistent patterns of differential accessibility or thresholds and mutual interactions between these elements create the emergence of relatively stable long-term habitual behavioral tendencies across time (see, e.g., Cramer et al., 2013). Second, it can help to elucidate what constitutes healthy and unhealthy personality functioning. The insight that personality should in fact be regarded as system of processes that help us to adapt to and navigate our environment, suggests that healthy personality functioning indeed is dynamic and changing rather than stable. One way then to characterize maladaptive personality functioning is when the patterns of changes and fluctuations in personality related processes become inappropriate in size and nature, or uncoupled from their contextual contingences. Indeed, many forms of mental health (personality) disorder involve disproportionate behaviors to common threats or social situations, or are characterized by a rigidity that is not appropriately contingent anymore on the events of everyday life. Personality dynamics can offer the ideal framework or window to study these patterns of abnormal and disruptive behaviors, feelings, and thoughts, and thus demonstrate how adaptive and maladaptive psychological functioning can be captured in the same framework.

Cross-references: Personality stability; state/trait interactions; state/trait distinctions; situational consistency; cognitive-affective processing system; dynamic systems approach to personality; if-then behavioral consistencies; person-by-situation approach; trait-situation interaction; personality processes; behavioral flexibility; cross-situational consistency

References

Cervone, D. (2005). Personality architecture: Within-person structures and processes. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *56*, 423-452.

Cramer, A. O., van der Sluis, S., Noordhof, A., Wichers, M., Geschwind, N., Aggen, S. H., Kendler, K. S., & Borsboom, D. (2012). Dimensions of normal personality as networks in search of equilibrium: You can't like parties if you don't like people. *European Journal of Personality*, *26*, 414-431.

Fleeson, W. (2004). Moving personality beyond the person-situation debate: The challenge and the opportunity of within-person variability. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 13*, 83-87.

Fleeson, W., & Law, M. K. (2015). Trait manifestations as density distributions: The role of actors, situations, and observers in explaining stability and variability. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 109*, 1090-1104.

Hamaker, E. L., Ceulemans, E., Grasman, R. P. P. P., & Tuerlinckx, F. (2015). Modeling affect dynamics: State-of-the-art and future challenges. *Emotion Review*, *7*, 316-322.

Hamaker, E. L., & Wichers, M. (2017). No Time Like the Present: Discovering the Hidden Dynamics in Intensive Longitudinal Data. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 26*, 10-15.

Hofmans, J., De Clercq, B., Kuppens, P., Verbeke, L., & Widiger, T. (in press). Testing the structure and process of personality using ambulatory assessment data: An overview of within-person and person-specific techniques. *Psychological Assessment*.

Houben, M., Van Den Noortgate, W., & Kuppens, P. (2015). The relation between short-term emotion dynamics and psychological well-being: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 141,* 901-930.

Lewin, K. (1935). *A dynamic theory of personality*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Mehl, M. R., & Conner, T. S. (Eds.). (2012). *Handbook of research methods for studying daily life*. New York: Guilford Press.

Mischel, W. & Shoda, Y. (1998). Reconciling processing dynamics and personality dispositions. *Annual Review of Psychology, 49*, 229-258.

Mischel, W., Shoda, Y., & Ayduk, O. (2007). *Introduction to personality: Toward an integrative science of the person* (8th ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Personality Dynamics (2017, October 26). Retrieved from https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/personality_dynamics

Vansteelandt, K., & Van Mechelen, I. (1998). Individual differences in situation–behavior profiles: A triple typology model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*, 751.