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The Future of Personality Theory: a Processual Approach

Svetlana N. Kostromina¹  · Natalia V. Grishina¹

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Abstract The perpetual discussion of approaches and principles in the study of personality has been one of the notable trends of development of psychological science over many decades. The structural approach, based on the delineation of a person's traits and characteristics, made an important contribution to various branches of psychology, but now the scientific community has recognized the limitations of a structural understanding of personality. Its inadequacy becomes particularly obvious in today's conditions, when fundamental changes pose a challenge to man's ability to respond flexibly to changing conditions of everyday existence, as well as to larger-scale changes. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is obvious that there is a need for new ways to understand and describe the personality: Scholars are calling for study of the dynamic personality, of the personality as an open system. At the foundational level, modern personality psychology should incorporate classical ideas about its structure; secondly, it should consider personality in the context of the individual's lifetime; and – at the highest level – it should describe personality as the subject of Being. We submit our own description of personality psychology's problem field.

Keywords Personality psychology · Problem field of personality psychology · Processual approach · Structural approach · Existential approach · Situational and contextual level · Everyday life psychology

Introduction

One of the notable trends of development of psychological science over many decades is the perpetual discussion of approaches and principles in the study of personality. Peter Giordano's article (2017), titled "Individual personality is best understood as process,

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not structure: A Confucian-inspired perspective”, therefore was bound to attract readers’ attention. Its headline affirms the author’s rejection of the structural approach as the priority for understanding personality; he presents the processual approach as more relevant; and, finally, offers Confucian ideas as a theoretical support for this approach.

The structural approach, based on the delineation of a person’s traits and characteristics, at one time not only played an important role in shaping the problem field of personality psychology, but also made an important contribution to various branches of psychology, the design of psychological research tools, effective diagnostic techniques and procedures. In this paradigm, ideas developed about stable systems within the personality: specific structures that sustain it.

It should be noted, however, that the scientific community quickly recognized the limitations of an understanding of the personality based on description of its structure. Criticism of individual personality traits as poor predictors of behavior began, as is widely known, with Mischel (1968), and posed a challenge to traditional approaches; according to Ross and Nisbett (1991), it shook the edifice of personality psychology to its foundations. In his work, Mischel (1968) makes an attempt to generalize and compare the results accumulated by that time through numerous psychodiagnostic studies. These results showed a low consistency among data obtained from different studies of behavior and corresponding personality traits, and forced Mischel to conclude that the low prognostic potential of traditionally studied personality traits makes it impossible to predict behavior. This result gave him reason to doubt that personality traits possess trans-situational consistency, and to advance the fundamental hypothesis that cross-situational consistency of behavior may be the exception, and specificity of behavior the rule (Mischel 1968).

Discussion about the interrelationship of situational and personality variables in the description of human behavior is still not over. Debate continues between advocates of the traditional approach, with its primary emphasis on stable personality traits, who are trying to adapt them to the current situation with its new challenges to personality psychology, and advocates of a radical revision of existing conceptions (Roberts 2009). It is noteworthy that the professional interests of the scientists themselves, their “specializations,” affect the theoretical positions of psychologists when it comes to the role of situational and personal parameters in the determination of human behavior. A survey of social psychologists and psychologists working in the field of personality revealed their unequivocal commitment to the “situationist” and “dispositional” positions, respectively.

The “vitality” of the structural approach is not without foundation. It has value – and here we cannot disagree with Uher (2015a, 2015b) and Giordano (2017) – as an instrument to compare psychological data of various types – age, gender, professional status, including comparisons of individual data with normative indicators. McAdams (2001) has written about this, pointing out that the advantage of the description of personality in terms of comparable dispositional traits is their decontextualized, trans-situational character.

Problems of Personality Psychology in the Global Discourse

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, the need for new solutions in describing and understanding the personality is becoming obvious. In modern

psychology, a paradoxical situation has been created where, on the one hand, there are calls for the study of the dynamic personality, of the personality as an open system; but on the other, structural approaches continue to dominate, especially in empirical research. Not coincidentally, the Five-Factor Model, mentioned in this connection by Giordano (2017), continues to lead as a research tool at even the most recent conferences on personality psychology. Nearly one fifth (21.3%) of the presentations given at the 2nd World Conference on Personality (March 31 – April 4, 2016, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) used the Five-Factor Model of personality or focused their work on the use of the Five-Factor questionnaire. Analysis of the presentations shows the *dominance of the structural-functional research paradigm*: modeling the structure of the personality and studying individual personality traits, including in their relationship with different aspects of human life. The same is true for the development, testing, or modification of various diagnostic questionnaires. Here one can agree with Giordano, that the structural approach has taken over the world.

An analogous situation occurred at the 18th European Conference on Personality (July 2016, Timisoara, Romania), where there was a significant predominance of reports on the study of personality traits and personality structure (15.8%). The emphasis is shifting: the focus of attention is on volitional and moral characteristics that optimize social functioning and allow a person to be successful (graciousness, impulsiveness, self-regulation, adaptability, openness, conscientiousness, flexibility, social elasticity, ability to be pleasant, accepting, etc.), but the study of personality traits remains the mainstream focus in the psychological study of personality. However, comparison of the materials from the last European Conference on Personality with the previous one, held in Switzerland in 2014 (Lausanne, July 15–19, 2014), shows that the tendency to consider the personality as a dynamic integrative structure is growing (Fig. 1).

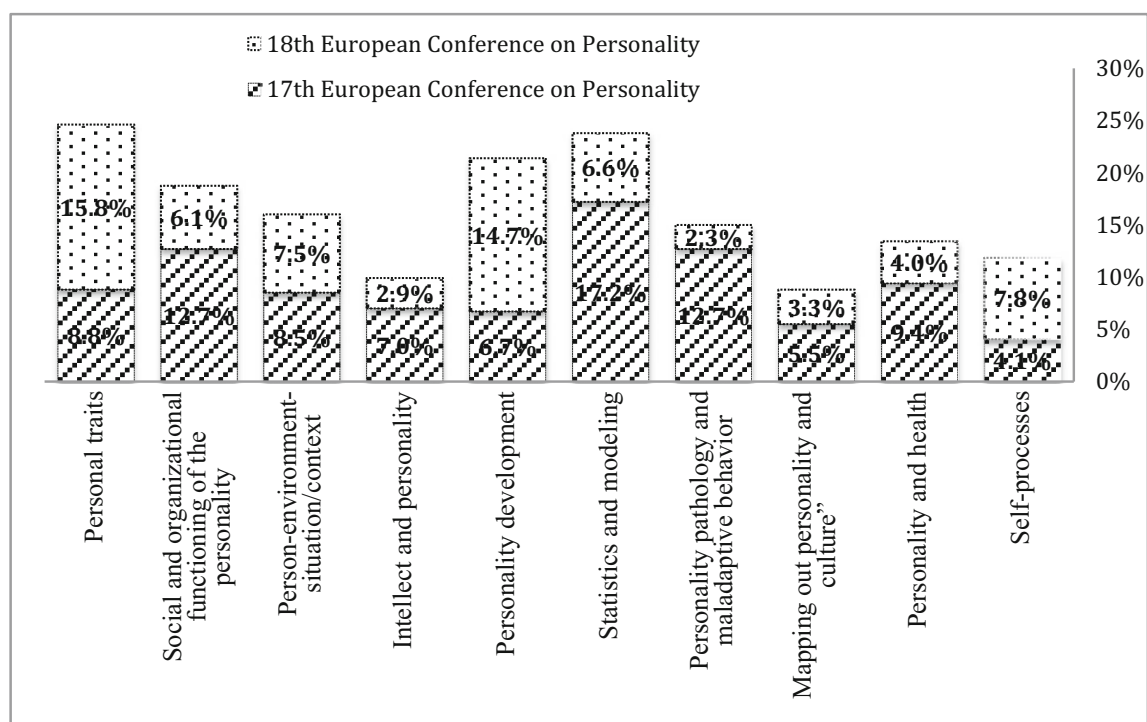


Fig. 1 Comparative analysis of the topics of presentations at the 17th and 18th European Conferences on Personality

At the same time, the very formulation of the problems by the key lectures and papers at both the 2nd International and 18th European conferences on personality – for example, “What do we mean by personality? Reconsidering old issues in light of modern theory and new data”, by Ryne A. Sherman and Ashley Bell Jones (2016); “Personality analysis at three levels”; “Rethinking personality psychology”, as well as a variety of structural models of personality (ethical and emic, one-dimensional and multidimensional, structure of personality in a profession, in adolescence, in an ethnic and religious context), demonstrate an understanding of the need for development of the modern theory of personality and a change in the paradigm of personality research, particularly its conceptual foundation. Thus, the idea stated by Giordano in his article, about the limited understanding of the individual personality within the structural approach, reflects modern trends in this branch of psychology, as does his call to change the paradigm to a process-oriented approach.

At the 18th European Conference on Personality, 14.7% of the presentations report on research into the dynamics of personal change (Lifelogging technology). This means the study of dynamic processes in the personality, processes of internal development, change, and self-change throughout a person’s life. The non-randomness of the shifting attention of researchers toward the processual characteristics of the personality is confirmed by the increase in the number of studies of self-processes (self-perception, self-understanding, self-regulation, and self-control), which is supplemented by growing interest in self-improvement, self-knowledge, and self-evaluation (7.8%). Thus modern personality psychology actively highlights the mechanisms of self-determination that allow people to become the source of their own development and change, the authors of their own lives. Furthermore, the subject of the presentations “No excuses, it’s time to study real people in the real world”, by Sam Gosling (*Abstract book of the 18th European Conference on Personality*, July 2016, p. 115), and “Personality psychology as a comprehensive, dynamic, and idiographic science”, testifies to the keenly felt need in the scientific community for a modern psychology of personality.

Like Gosling, Giordano (2015) appeals for an understanding of the real personality, pointing out that we are accustomed to operating with average categories derived from the study of groups, in which individuality is lost. “To appreciate intra-individual personality process and variation”, the author writes (without which prediction is impossible), “personality psychologists should adopt a perspective that conceptualizes personality in terms of open-system, emergent, and dynamic *processes*”. The consonance of ideas only underscores the growing consensus that a change is needed in the approach to the description and study of the personality of modern man.

Paradigm Shift: Back to the Future?

The search for new approaches to personality is due not only to the shortcomings and limitations of the structural approach, as Giordano rightly says. The inadequacy of such descriptions of personality becomes particularly obvious in current conditions, when fundamental changes are posing a challenge to man’s ability to respond flexibly to changing conditions of existence, as well as to larger-scale changes.

How do people feel in this new reality? How do they cope with its challenges? Awareness of the theoretical and practical significance of these questions has led to the

formulation of new tasks. Studies of human interaction with the surrounding world have become a priority. The changing reality itself is becoming the engine that drives the study of the changing personality, in the context of those ongoing changes.

The shift of the focus of attention to theoretical models describing the interaction of the person with situational and environmental variables was already becoming a trend of world science in the field of personality psychology in the 1980s.

Today we can unequivocally assert that the modern approaches to understanding and describing the psychology of personality are an obvious departure from static descriptions (such as the structural approach) and are a transition to dynamic approaches. The “dynamic personality” is one that is not constrained by the totality of its characteristics, but is in a process of constant change in the context of its existence. There is every reason to assume that the development of a contextual approach is the most immediate prospect and challenge facing personality psychology.

That is why description of the personality in interaction with the surrounding world is becoming the most important vector of development of new approaches. McAdams (2001), in his concept of human individuality, includes such constructs as goals, life tasks, plans, aspirations, etc., which are the more flexible characteristics associated with context.

In his article, Giordano, outlining a processual approach to personality, points to the integration of the person and the situation as one of its advantages (p. 509). As we have already noted, the relevance of this task is determined by changes in modern reality, creating a new psychological situation of human existence, the main characteristics of which are uncertainty and instability; the ways that people interact with context are changing accordingly.

The totality of all conditions, from the limitations of structural descriptions of the personality to the global civilizational changes of the present day, has also determined the paradigm shift in the study of personality that is actually under way in modern personality psychology – from the paradigm of the structural approach to that of the “dynamic personality” referred to in Giordano’s article as a process-oriented approach.

It is important to note here that the rudiments of this idea in fact have a fairly long history. G. Allport (1937), who made a name for himself primarily in psychology, in the concept of personality traits and the dispositional theory of personality, noted that personality is more of a transitional process than a finished product: it has some stable traits, but at the same time it is constantly changing.

In his article, Giordano contrasts the concepts of Being and Becoming, with which he identifies the structural and processual models of personality. But is this really valid? Does an ontological world view really lie at the foundation of the structural approach? Or more precisely, “a structural understanding of persons and personality derives from an ontological world view that foregrounds fixed and distinct entities over fluid and dynamic processes” (Giordano 2017, p. 505).

The concept of Being is most clearly represented in the works of scientists who are developing existentialist approaches in psychology, in particular the well-known American scientist R. May, for example in his famous work *The Discovery of Being. Writings of Being* (1994). Nevertheless, Being, in the works of the existentialists, has never been viewed as a kind of static existence of the individual. On the contrary, they view Being not as something that is automatically given to a person, but as a process of constant choice and affirmation.

This approach was close to that of representatives of humanistic psychology, notably A. Maslow (1968). They rejected the concept of “formation” which was prevalent at that time, pointing out that the personality is never fully completed, but is in a process of constant development. It is thanks to their work that the concept of Becoming was affirmed in psychology, meaning that a person is in a constant state of change and development.

Thus the concepts of Being and Becoming, including in the processual approach to personality, have their own history in Western psychology. It is hardly rational to counterpose them, much less to create some kind of identification between Being and a static structure.

Another question arises in connection with Giordano’s counterposition of the structural and processual approaches, notwithstanding the examples he gives of the great potential and possibilities of the structural approach, especially in comparisons between people. The author associates the prospects of developing the processual approach with the philosophy of Confucianism, as a source of the idea that the “individual develops interpersonal sensitivity”, “benevolent, non-coercive influence” (Giordano 2017, p. 510).

Without dwelling on the potential of Confucianism to construct processual foundations for the study of personality, we note only that the advantages of the process-centric model, using classical Confucianism (which integrates persons and situations, relationality, and interdisciplinarity; and focuses on the uniqueness of individual personalities, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches), are also typical of other scientific paradigms (particularly the existentialist approach).

The undoubted value of those postulates, however, does not take into account that there are other equally important characteristics of modernity, without which the study and description of the uniqueness and individuality of the personality today is impossible. For example, the primacy of possibilities and self-determination, as opposed to necessity and determinism. A look at the category of the possible as “what ‘may be’”, in contrast to the necessary “as that which cannot be”, shows us that at the present time, changes in persons, and also the dynamism of these changes, are primarily self-determined. In today’s world, what will happen to a person tomorrow and what his life’s path will be depend on the person himself. Transforming possibilities into reality occurs only through non-deterministic (or rather, self-determined) choice and decision (Leontiev 2011, p. 12).

That said, there are different levels of realization by persons of their potential at different stages of life. Furthermore, today people are aware of their simultaneous involvement in many social groups, because they play not one but many social roles at the same time, which gives rise to the phenomenon of so-called multiple identity (Tajfel & Turner 1986). These adjustments to the portrait of the contemporary person allows us to conclude that new approaches in personality psychology will involve not only overcoming the limitations of the previous paradigms, but also considering the modern context, the challenges of modernity, among the most important of which is change of the changes themselves (Asmolov 2015). In this situation, when the contours of the future society are still just being defined, the changes taking place are so dynamic that coping with them is becoming a global challenge for the personality, a challenge that determines the trajectory of one’s path in life; it is fair to talk about searching for points of contact between existing approaches and new points of orientation that would allow

us to organize and systematize the entire spectrum of the modern phenomenology of personality. Here the crucial issue for the emerging new approaches in personality psychology is the interrelationship of structural and processual characteristics in the description of the personality.

The Problem Field of Modern Personality Psychology

At the foundational level, modern personality psychology should incorporate classical ideas about its structure; secondly, it should consider personality in the context of the individual's lifetime; and – at the highest level – it should describe personality as the subject of Being. The interrelationship of these levels, their mutual influence and the transitions from one to another, become vitally important.

It would seem that each of these levels of description of the personality, despite the fact that Giordano (2017) has counterposed them, already has its own phenomenological field and its own descriptive constructs. Thus McAdams (2001), mentioned above, believes that the description of human individuality should have a multilevel character. The completeness of that description must include both the level of comparable dispositional traits and the level of personal interests and aspirations, in the context appropriate to that person. To these levels, McAdams adds the level of personal history, a person's identity, ensuring the unity of the characteristics of other levels.

In our view, the highest level in the description of human existence is that of Being. Its content is shaped by the phenomenology of the meanings and values of life, of human freedom and responsibility in the world. In modern psychology, these topics begin to be developed in humanistic and existential psychology, under the influence of the philosophical concept of *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1927; 1962). The content of this level is human interaction with the world.

The question naturally arises: what sort of interrelationship is it? The existing and developing structural-functional approach is not only convenient to describe the individual manifestations of personality, but it also allows the study of patterns in personality development, processes of change, its realization in the person's occupation, life, and relationships. However, the ambiguity of the interrelationships between the levels and the "phenomena of life", which the famous Russian scientist S.L. Rubinstein (2003) called "non-functional 'units' of the psyche", posed a number of requirements for solving this problem in the context of the multi-level approach. Rubinstein calls non-functional units of the psyche "life events", which are not reducible to discrete mental structures and states. He considered their study to be the most important task of psychology.

Furthermore, we cannot ignore the obvious need at present for a holistic description of the person, taking into account new points of orientation in the understanding of the personality — life in a changing reality, under conditions of uncertainty, diversity, and complexity. This new system of interaction between man and the world, and also the phenomena that are engendered by it, determining Being, is an integral part of the subject field of personality psychology today.

It is important to note that the multi-level nature of the subject field of personality psychology and the levels of descriptions of personality are not isomorphic. The traditional description of personality as a layered structure presupposes its functioning as an integral system, including interrelated components and elements. When we talk

about a multi-level description of subject field of personality psychology, it is primarily about substantially different problem areas, the phenomenology of which encompasses phenomena of a different order (Grishina et al. 2018). At the same time, these areas are related to one another in a certain way. In our view, the interrelationship is indicated by so-called “transitional zones” – personal phenomena that are related simultaneously to different levels, and in each of which the personality manifests itself in its entirety, uniqueness, and diverse relations to reality (Fig. 2).

The first level is the study of the personality from the standpoint of its structure and functional characteristics. It contains extra-situational, decontextualized dimensions of personality, which in psychology are traditionally called traits. The traits and characteristics of the person according to various theories fit into the corresponding structure of personality, its “nuclear” and “peripheral” areas. The foundations of personality traits, the structural-functional level of describing them, include physiological, neurological and other individual properties. The stability of these characteristics is revealed in their trans-situational progression.

However, the structural and functional level of the description of what a personality is, is distinguished by an inevitably static nature, and because of this, a certain “non-manifestation”, a “lack of expression” (which also creates the possibility of many interpretations in different personality theories). This level of personality research is directed to the search for answers to the question: “What is the personality?” As already noted, the normative and extra-situational properties of “traits” at one time made them the most important psycho-diagnostic characteristics.

The limitations of static descriptions, the rejection of the concept of “formation” which implies some kind of “completeness” in development, in favor of the concept of Becoming

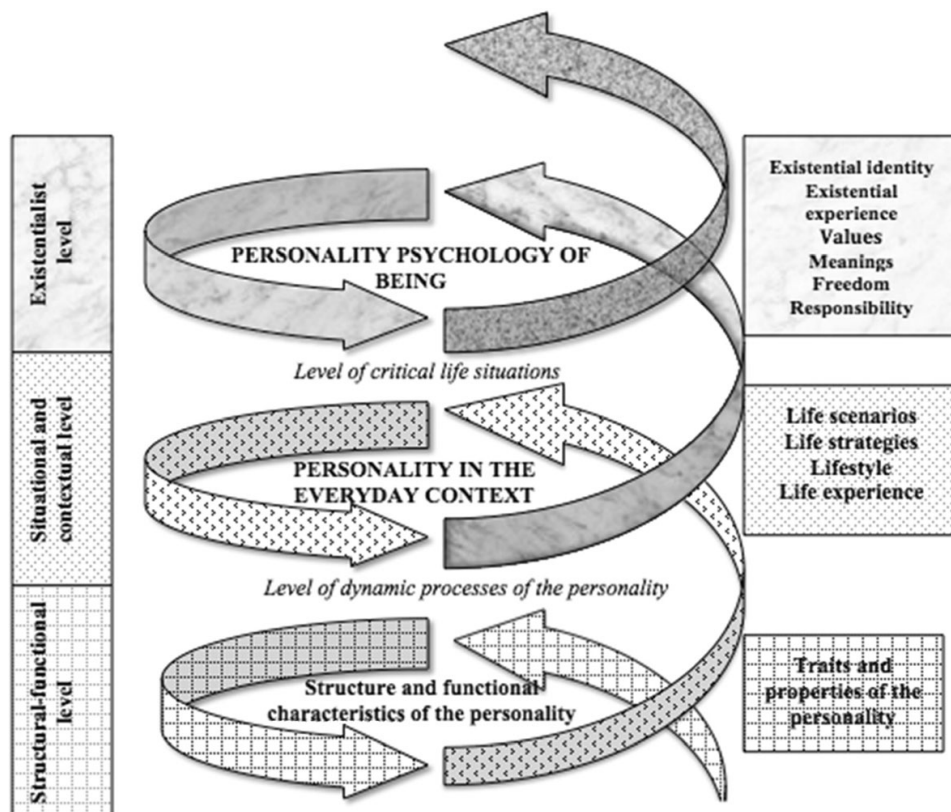


Fig. 2 The subject field of personality psychology

(primarily thanks to the humanistic psychologists) shifts the focus to dynamic aspects of people's lives, activity associated with the assertion of their own Being. People "distinguish" or "define" themselves by their activity. This level of description corresponds to "what the person does", an aspect of the subject field of psychology which shows up in study of the "dynamic personality" (Geukes et al. 2017), which is changed in the event field.

The main characteristic of the "zone" of the subject field of personality psychology, describing it as dynamic rather than static, has the effect of increasing attention to situational and contextual variables, which is a necessary condition for studying "a changing person in a changing world". Life goals, life plans, life scenarios, the processes of a person's self-change are at the center of attention. This level of phenomena is determined by the person's daily activity.

The level of everyday life is a familiar one, and to describe it we have no need of individual personality traits and properties, but rather its integral characteristics, such as the concepts of style or experience, which are becoming increasingly popular in modern psychology.

The zone of critical life situations becomes a transitional one between the second and third levels of the subject field of personality.

One of the first to write about them was Jaspers, who developed the idea, important for psychology, of "awakening for Existence" because of the experience of boundary situations. Boundary situations, according to Jaspers, are the part of human existence in which we find suffering, awareness of the finiteness of life, and unhappiness. This is life turmoil, when a person confronts a "collapse" of everyday existence, critical situations in which the true meaning and value of Being are revealed. At these moments, a person is removed from the world of his everyday life and ideas, and a true experience arises, an "illumination of Existence". Thus living in boundary situations gives people the opportunity to strengthen their "selfhood" and authenticity, and these critical situations themselves become a kind of transition to a new, higher level of existence.

The highest level of human existence is the existential. It can be described by the concepts of the existential realities of human existence, the existential experience, and the existential identity. This field is formed by such significant phenomena as freedom, responsibility, and meaning, the study of which is becoming extremely timely because of the changes in society and the life of modern man – the challenges of uncertainty, expanding possibilities, the need to choose under conditions when traditional supports and points of orientation have been lost. It is the timeliness of the ideas of existential philosophy and existential psychology for solving the problems of modern man that is attracting the attention of modern scientists.

"Movement" from the lower to the higher levels of describing the human personality is movement from structural descriptions to processual ones. If the first, "lower", level is represented by structural-functional descriptions of the personality, then the processual, dynamic characteristics that explain the behavior and activity of the individual in the context of life begin to dominate at the next level. The higher, "existential", level is described by the processes of human interaction with Being.

Conclusion

Returning to Giordano's article, we refer to one of his final questions, which he formulates thus: Can there be a pure-process, structure-less personality? (Giordano

2017, p. 13). The proposed description of the subject field of personality psychology is an attempt to answer this by ordering the phenomena that in modern research describe the personality from different standpoints. The Being of the personality is not limited by the totality of its structural and processual characteristics and is much more multifaceted. Accordingly, we must assert a substantial unity between existing knowledge about the personality and the new data and planned research. This unity is manifested in the fact that phenomena at the different levels are closely interlinked. Their relationship is in the transition from the static to the dynamic, from individual situations to contexts, to the fact that the relationship between the levels is two-sided. The complex character and significance of the interconnection among various personal characteristics and phenomena is expressed by the fact that a person's higher levels of Being, connected with the values and meanings of his or her existence, of "life-creation", are projected onto the "lower" levels of daily activity, its structural elements, transforming them, setting about a dynamic of self-change. Psychology thereby addresses the higher manifestations of man" his soul, his spirit, that is, to the summit of psychology (L.S. Vygotsky 1982). In European psychology, V. Frankl had an analogous vision, calling his psychotherapy that of ultimate meaning, stressing its appeal to the heights of the human soul. "Our word in psychology: away from *superficial* psychology — in consciousness, a phenomenon is not equal to Being. But we also oppose *depth* psychology. Our psychology is a *peak* psychology (it does not determine the 'depths' of the personality, but its 'peaks'") (Vygotsky 1982, p. 166).

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Conflict Interest The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Approval This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by the author.

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