

Running head: PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY IN AUSTRALIA

Personality psychology in Australia: Introduction to the special issue

Luke D. Smillie & Nick Haslam

The University of Melbourne

This is the author manuscript accepted for publication and has undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the [Version of Record](#). Please cite this article as doi: [10.1111/ajpy.12234](https://doi.org/10.1111/ajpy.12234)

This article is protected by copyright. All rights reserved.

Author Manuscript

Abstract

In this editorial we present an overview of the special issue. We argue that the influence of Australian personality psychology has diminished in recent decades, and propose that this decline partly reflects a set of misconceptions about the field and a lack of awareness of contemporary theory and research in this area. We challenge the mistaken beliefs that personality psychology is biologically reductionist, that it views traits as unchanging essences, that it focuses only on structure and ignores process, that it reduces the complexity of personality to a few trait dimensions, and that it relies excessively on correlations among self-report measures. Articles within this special issue undermine many of these misconceptions. We argue that the time is ripe for renewed growth in personality psychology in Australia, and for a strengthening of ties to neighboring fields such as social psychology. In our view, such developments will be of value to Australian psychological science as a whole.

Keywords: personality psychology; traits; individual differences; social psychology; psychology in Australia

The study of personality has been a traditional area of strength within Australian psychology. Australian researchers have made major contributions to international efforts to understand human individuality, and in the second half of the twentieth century the field loomed large in the domestic scene. A little over 30 years ago, when the last special issue of the *Australian Journal of Psychology* devoted to personality appeared (Brebner, 1983), it was observed that personality psychology had been the second most published area of research in the journal for the three decades since its 1949 launch (White, Sheehan, & Korboot, 1983). Today, however, the landscape has changed. Although personality psychology remains a productive and innovating field, its influence has declined in Australia relative to other subdisciplines of psychology. This is shown by its relatively small size, and the evidence that it is receiving a diminishing

fraction of the research funding that flows to psychology as a whole (see Boag, this issue).

The apparent decline in the visibility of and esteem for personality psychology in Australia is regrettable, and represents a loss for psychology overall. As an inherently generalist and multi-disciplinary field, a revitalised personality psychology has the potential to draw together research from clinical psychology, cognitive psychology, social psychology, and behavioural neuroscience—as well as more applied areas such as organisational and political behaviour—in ways that serve the integrative goals of 21st century psychological science. So what has gone wrong? We believe that the slow eclipse of personality psychology in Australia partly reflects a lack of awareness of contemporary personality research, combined with a set of interest-dampening misconceptions that many psychologists hold about the field. This special issue was initiated to promote the twin goals of raising awareness and dispelling those misconceptions.

Turning first to consciousness raising, Simon Boag's (this issue) historical analysis of Australian personality psychology provides a masterful overview of the field since its humble antipodean beginnings. Boag demonstrates that the study of personality and

individual differences was pivotal to the nation's first departments of psychology and remained a vital focus of basic scholarship during the discipline's rapid growth during the 20th century. Boag shows that proponents of personality psychology had diverse theoretical perspectives, with the trait approach becoming particularly well represented in the last quarter century, and also led practical applications in the fields of education and organisational psychology. His survey of the current personality psychology research community demonstrates its breadth, impact, and empirical and theoretical originality, but does not shy away from the organisational and funding challenges it is currently facing.

Ample evidence for the high international impact of Australian personality research can also be found in Bucich and MacCann's (this issue) review of Australian researchers' contribution to the study and assessment of emotional intelligence. Although that contribution is not as widely recognised as it might be, Bucich and MacCann demonstrate that local and expatriate Australians have had a disproportionate presence at the leading edge of emotional intelligence research and its application. Australian researchers have also played a major role in studies of the Dark Triad traits—narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism—as reviewed by Koehn, Okan, and Jonason (this issue). Koehn and colleagues not only shine a light into this domain of darkness, very

much a subject of fascination in our current cultural moment, but also show how personality psychology grounds individual differences in theories of evolved human life histories, social niches, and adaptive challenges. Their work helps to understand the complexities of these entwined traits and to answer the difficult question of whether or when they become pathological.

Turning next to misconceptions, several articles in the special issue challenge several out-dated or simply erroneous beliefs about personality and personality psychology. One common stereotype of personality psychology is that the field is wedded to reductionist biological explanations of behaviour to the exclusion of social and cultural influences. Barlow (this issue) firmly rebuts this charge. She argues that, although known genetic influences on personality refute the implied “blank slate” view of some social scientific thinking (Pinker, 2002), the same research that demonstrates the heritability of personality *also* demonstrates the critical role of the environment. Moreover, a rich literature in personality psychology has charted the development and shaping of personality across the lifespan, and the role that the social and cultural context plays in this process (McAdams & Olson, 2010)

A related misconception is the mistaken belief that personality psychologists view personality characteristics as fixed and unchanging. The question “*Don’t you believe personality can change?*” is often thrown out as a challenge to personality psychologists, despite the decades of research they themselves have conducted demonstrating that it does. The flexibility of personality has been recognised since Allport (1937), and is formalised in the contemporary perspective that personality traits summarise distributions of dynamic behavioural and affective states (Fleeson, 2001). The notion of personality traits as fixed, biologically-based essences, might be traced to a vulgarised retelling of mid-20th century trait theory, but bears little resemblance to personality psychology today. Contemporary personality research has documented the malleability of traits (Roberts et al., 2017), illustrated bi-directional links between personality and social context (Furr & Funder, 2018), and de-essentialised the trait concept (Haslam, Bastian & Bissett, 2004),

An allied misconception of personality psychology is that it is restricted to arid issues of psychological structure to the exclusion of psychological process. Although it is true that determining the structure of human personality is a key goal of personality psychology, it is just one of many—among identification of the causes and consequences of personality. Moreover, the value of structural models of personality for guiding a truly

integrative and incremental science is perhaps under-appreciated. Anglim and O'Connor (this issue) provide an excellent overview of how psychological scientists can employ trait models in their work. Although they argue that the currently dominant 'Big Five' model is a useful framework for the field, they are at pains to make several crucial points: 1) the Big Five seeks to provide a map of the expansive trait universe, not a narrow shortlist of traits, 2) the Big Five is not the only means to structure personality, and alternative frameworks such as HEXACO have demonstrable value, and 3) there are myriad narrow traits that are deserving of study, and often afford superior prediction of behaviour to the more familiar broad traits. In short, Anglim and O'Connor explain how the study of personality structure is, non-reductive, integrative, and of pragmatic value for guiding theory and research.

Relatedly, Haslam's contribution (this issue) also addresses personality structure with respect to the fundamental question of whether personality variations can best be modelled as continuous dimensions or discontinuous types. Although dimensional structure is assumed by most contemporary researchers, typological ideas endure among some psychologists, especially in the domain of personality disorders, and also among laypeople. Haslam's review of taxometric research makes a strong case for scepticism about the existence of any personality types and has clear implications for

personality assessment, for the description of abnormal personality, and for psychiatric classification.

Yet another misconception about personality psychology is that it relies largely on correlations among self-report measures. This overlooks the rich history of quasi-experimental research in personality psychology (Revelle, 2007) and more recent research that has sought to directly manipulate personality traits and their associated processes (e.g., Jacques-Hamilton, Sun, & Smillie, 2018). There is also extensive use of behavioural paradigms in personality psychology, as exemplified by Smillie, Zhao, Lawn, Perry and Laham (this issue), whose review of personality in relation to prosocial and moral behaviour includes coverage of the burgeoning literature at the interface of personality psychology and behavioural economics. This research shows how personality traits map onto a variety of social preferences modelled within economic games—such as fairness, reciprocity, punishment and helping behaviour. These studies help to test predictions from personality psychology and also clarify the psychological nature of the behavioural preferences studied by economists. Work of this kind shows how personality psychology is a science of behaviour rather than simply an exercise in correlating questionnaires, as it is sometimes viewed.

As co-editors of this special issue we hope that dispelling some of the misconceptions surrounding personality psychology, and building awareness of the quality and diversity of local contributions to it, will help to raise the field's profile in Australia. One key challenge to this mission is building stronger bridges between personality psychology and related fields where the importance of individual differences is demonstrable but unappreciated. One salient example for us concerns the neighbouring field of social psychology. Whereas the two fields are conjoined in the USA, sitting under the umbrella of the 7,000-member Society of Personality and Social Psychology, and sharing the pages of the most prestigious journals (e.g., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *Social Psychological and Personality Science*), in Australia they are largely siloed. Social psychology has become a significantly larger field here than personality psychology and maintains a local organisation (Society of Australasian Social Psychologists, SASP) that has very little overlap of membership with its smaller personality counterpart (Australian Conference on Personality and Individual Differences, ACPID).

Intellectual segregation between personality and social psychology is usually traced back to the false dichotomy of 'persons-versus-situations' that clouded much thinking in psychology in the 1970s. However, we also see an explanation in the distinctive versions

of personality and social psychology that took root in Australia during the second half of the 20th century. At this time, personality psychology was dominated by the English trait tradition and the polarising figure of Hans Eysenck. As Boag (this issue) observes, Eysenckian work prevailed in this journal's 1983 special issue on personality and temperament. That approach was perceived to champion the biological basis of traits while ignoring the role of the environment and social context, and to emphasise the stability of personality across time and situations without accounting for more contextualised and socially emergent sources of behaviour. Additionally, more controversial aspects of Eysenck's work, such as his descriptions of psychological differences between racial groups, seemed to cast personality psychology in an inherently right-leaning mould. In these regards Eysenck, and the Australian personality psychology that he fathered, seemed sterner and more biopsychological than mainstream American personality psychology of the time.

Australian social psychology in the late 20th century, which also had a European provenance, was perhaps equally distinctive. Led locally by John Turner, who had trained under Henri Tajfel in Bristol, the social identity theory approach rapidly became the dominant force in Australian social psychology from the 1980s and made the country a world-leading centre for social identity scholarship. The social identity

tradition was in some respects the mirror image of Eysenckian trait psychology. It emphasised the collective determinants of behaviour, criticised any focus on individuals abstracted from their groups and societies (including the supposed individualism of American social psychology), believed in the profoundly contextualised and dynamic nature of behaviour while rejecting the notion of stable traits, distrusted genetic (or indeed any biologically-oriented) explanations, and typically took a staunchly left-leaning activist stance toward social issues. It is unsurprising that these approaches to personality and social psychology in Australia repelled one other, and lay the groundwork for years of mutual suspicion — and even hostility — between the subdisciplines.

We are of the firm view that the time is ripe for reconciliation. Contemporary personality psychology offers an explicitly flexible and dynamic view of personality, and includes the study of personality development, personality change, person-situation transactions, and fluctuating personality states. Though it recognises that biological processes underpin personality phenomena (as is equally the case for phenomena studied by social psychologists), it is not biologically 'reductionist'. It is not politically right-leaning either, and in fact it has elucidated individual differences that are intrinsically relevant to social and political progressivism (see Smillie et al., this issue).

Concurrently, Australian social psychology is a broader and richer field than it once was, with a greater diversity of theoretical approaches and a growing openness to individual differences. It includes productive research programs in social neuroscience and evolutionary social psychology—areas that might have once seemed too ‘biological’ for some. Australian social psychology has also moved towards greater recognition of and engagement with personality traits and processes. For example, the recent local conference in social psychology (SASP) has featured research into a wide variety of personality traits and other individual differences, such as attachment style, authoritarianism, coping styles, emotional intelligence, impulsivity, individualistic and collectivistic values, infant temperament, narcissism, need for control, prosocial traits, self-efficacy, self-esteem, self-objectification, social dominance orientation, creativity, need for cognition, and of course, the Big Five.

In short, there is clear evidence for a mutual convergence of personality and social psychology in Australia, and for a decline in the ideologically polarised views and misconceptions that have stood in the way of productive engagement. Social psychologists and personality psychologists alike have much to gain from collaboration, as some of the articles in this special issue make clear.

In conclusion, we reiterate that the contraction of Australian personality psychology in recent decades is a loss for psychology as a whole. The articles in this special issue show the significant and diverse contributions to psychological science made by Australian personality psychologists. Lack of awareness of the breadth and generativity of this area is perhaps owing to various misconceptions we routinely encounter about what personality is and how it is studied. We hope that this special issue helps to correct these misconceptions and revitalise personality psychology in Australia. As robust and cumulative science with meaningful connections to clinical psychology, cognitive psychology, and social psychology—among other sub-disciplines—it has sometimes been described as one of the last refuges for the generalist in psychology (McAdams, 1997). For such reasons, growth in personality science, and the strengthening of bonds with neighbouring disciplines, will be to the broader benefit of Australian psychological science.

References

- Allport, G.W. (1937). *Personality: a psychological interpretation*. Oxford, England: Holt.
- Anglim, J., & O'Connor, P. (2019). Measurement and research using the Big Five, HEXACO, and narrow traits: A primer for researchers and practitioners. *Australian Journal of Psychology*.
- Barlow, F. (2019). Nature vs. nurture is nonsense: On the necessity of an integrated genetic, social, developmental, and personality psychology. *Australian Journal of Psychology*.
- Boag, S. (2019). Australian personality research: Past, present, and future prospects. *Australian Journal of Psychology*.
- Brebner, J. (1983). Introduction to special issue on personality and temperament. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 35(3), 287–288.
- Bucich, M., & MacCann, C. (2019). Emotional intelligence research in Australia: Past contributions and future directions. *Australian Journal of Psychology*.
- Fleeson, W. (2001). Toward a structure- and process-integrated view of personality: Traits as density distributions of states. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(6), 1011-1027.
- Furr, M. & Funder, D. C. (2017). Persons, Situations, and Person-Situation Interactions. In John, O.P., & Robins, R.W. *Handbook of personality: Theory and research (4th Edition)*. New York, NY: Guilford.
- Haslam, N. (2019). Unicorns, snarks, and personality types: A review of the first 102 taxometric studies of personality. *Australian Journal of Personality*.
- Haslam, N., Bastian, B., & Bissett, M. (2004). Essentialist beliefs about personality and their implications. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 30, 1661-1673.

- Jacques-Hamilton, R., Sun, J. & Smillie, L. D. (in press). Costs and Benefits of Acting Extraverted: A Randomized Controlled Trial, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.
- Koehn, M. A., Okan, C., & Jonason, P. (2019). A primer on the Dark Triad traits. *Australian Journal of Psychology*.
- McAdams, D. P. (1997). A Conceptual History of Personality Psychology. In R. Hogan, J. Johnson, S. Briggs (Eds.), *Handbook of Personality Psychology* (pp. 3-39). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- McAdams, D. P., & Olson, B. D. (2010). Personality development: Continuity and change. In S. Fiske, D. Schacter, & R. Sternberg (Eds.), *Annual Review of Psychology* (Vol. 61, pp. 517–542). Palo Alto, CA: Annual Reviews.
- Pinker, S. (2002). *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Revelle, W. (2007) Experimental Approaches to the Study of Personality, n B. Robins, R. C. Fraley & R. F. Krueger (Eds.), *Handbook of research methods in personality psychology* (pp. 37–61). New York: Guilford Press.
- Roberts, B. W., Luo, J., Briley, D. A., Chow, P. I., Su, R., & Hill, P. L. (2017). A systematic review of personality trait change through intervention. *Psychological Bulletin*, 143(2), 117-141.
- Smillie, L. D., Zhao, K., Lawn, E. C. R., Perry, R. & Laham, S. M. (2019). Prosociality and morality through the lens of personality psychology. *Australian Journal of Psychology*.
- White, K. D., Sheehan, P. W., & Korboot, P. J. (1983). The Australian Journal of Psychology: The first 30 years. *Australian Psychologist*, 18(2), 261–272.