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Some Final Lessons From Jack Block

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Personality is a *system*, and its manifestations in thought, emotion, and behavior are dauntingly complex. The challenge for personality psychology is, as Jack Block (this issue) says in the target article, to develop a "model or point of view or productive principles that can . . . generate sufficient 'surface complexity arising out of deep simplicity'" (p. 22).

Easier said than done. Near the end of the article, Block offers some tantalizing hints as to what such a model might look like, and along the way dispenses a number of prescriptions for how personality research ought to proceed, and too often does not. These positive prescriptions might get lost, for some readers, among the various critiques that Block offers. So let me list (and paraphrase) a few of them.

1. *Do not be afraid to study many attributes of personality.* It is well known that Jack Block was no fan of the Big Five, and his critiques were extensive. However, perhaps because he raised so many criticisms, exactly what troubled him so deeply about the popularity of the Five Factor Approach (FFA; the term Block uses in the article) may have been less well understood. I believe a key consideration was a fear that by becoming the "personality rubric for our time" (p. 4) and establishing itself as the foundation of everything from developmental psychology to clinical psychology to studies of individual differences in brain function, the FFA would foreclose understanding of many aspects of personality that—it is widely acknowledged—the FFA simply misses, and more generally promote a nonthoughtful attitude toward the selection of the personality attributes addressed by research.

In my own work, I have almost always included measures of the Big Five, and I long suspected that Block did not really approve, though he never said this to me directly. But perhaps I was forgiven because I also almost never stopped there—my research usually includes the 100 wide-ranging items of Block's own California Q-set (CAQ), and many other variables as well (see, e.g., Fast & Funder, 2008, 2010; Funder & Colvin, 1991). Block also, in this target article, promotes Goldberg's "IPIP" effort to make extremely large numbers of personality measures and personality measurement items freely available through the internet, promoting the casting of a wide net over personality (Goldberg et al., 2006).

Block once told me that a reviewer had complained about one of his articles that he had analyzed "too many variables"—he retorted that the Emperor of Austria had once complained to Mozart that he used "too many notes." Of course, one problem with studying many personality variables at once is the possibility of capitalizing on chance, and in particular the fact that it is impossible to calculate the probability that, for example, 20 out of the 100 CAQ items would be correlated with a behavior or other outcome at better than $p < .05$. In an article that was decades before its time, Block (1960) presented a computer-based randomization procedure to evaluate such a probability; it lay dormant and almost unused until Ryne Sherman, a graduate student in my lab, updated and developed a method for employment with modern computer hardware and software and extended it to further, new uses (Sherman & Funder, 2009). It is now easy to assess the degree to which the results of a large number of analyses might capitalize on chance. We need no longer be afraid of "too many notes."

2. *Personality is not a list of traits, it is a system.* This principle is another basis of Block's misgivings about the Big Five—even though, in complete fairness, McCrae and Costa's (2008) Five Factor Theory arguably *is* a system. Beyond the FFA critique, Block's view of personality as a coherent system is the basis of his not entirely concealed sympathy for Freud and psychoanalytic theorizing, and for his more directly expressed admiration for the attempts by McAdams and his colleagues to understand individual lives (McAdams & Pals, 2006).[1]

The ideal for this system would be to start with a truly basic dimension of individual difference and, in

[1]His point of view also seems remarkably similar to that expressed in recent remarks by Walter Mischel (2009), who questioned whether "a model like the five factor theory, a conception like the Big Five, and a measurement tool like the NEO-R [was] really going to being equated with the very definition of personality? Was this field ready to have a view of the human being confined to such characterizations with adjectives that categorize people so simplistically? . . . The human personality in our science was in danger of becoming headless, brainless, self-less, decontextualized from the social world, lacking an unconscious, and missing an emotional/motivational system" (pp. 285–286). To my knowledge, neither Block nor Mischel ever acknowledged their surprisingly parallel reactions to the Big Five. Of course, their preferred alternatives were *not* the same.

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Table 1. *Some Parallels Block Draws With Piaget's Assimilation/Accommodation Distinction.*

Assimilation	Accommodation
Serotonin	Dopamine
Latent inhibition	Release from latent inhibition
Stability	Plasticity
Reality	Possibility
Conformity	Independence
Tradition	Innovation
Constancy	Change
Conservative	Liberal
"Alpha"	"Beta"
Overcontrol	Undercontrol

one direction, show how it is based on fundamental cognitive and perceptual processes and, in the other direction, show how it has important consequences for psychological experience, behavior, and life. Toward the end of the article, Block even offers a candidate for what one such dimension might be—it has been labeled in many ways but Block thought it was best captured by the Piagetian terms "assimilation" and "accommodation." In just a few pages, Block sketches a speculative vision for a personality system that ranges from biological foundations to basic cognitive processes to political implications. The reader can see Block's summary for himself or herself; I found it helpful, during my own perusal, to make a small chart of some the fascinating parallels he draws (see Table 1).

3. *Do not let statistics—factor analysis in particular— do your psychological thinking for you.* Block quotes Meehl that "No statistical procedure should be treated as a mechanical truth generator" (p. 6). This principle is generally true, and Block applies it specifically to factor analysis. He is in good position to do so, being himself an acknowledged authority on the technique (e.g., Block, 1965). Although Block makes many points about factor analysis in the target article, perhaps the key point is that the output of any analysis depends on its input. So, for example (and as he notes in his footnote 17), if a set of adjectives includes many synonyms or near-synonyms for the same trait, that trait will emerge as a strong factor. If only one term is included—perhaps because the one term is so perfectly descriptive that synonyms are rarely used—it will appear as an outlier. And yet it might be critically important. For this and other reasons Block pleads that psychological research that relies on factor analysis should also include "complementary, quite separate, and non-factor analytic" approaches (p. 6).

4. *Consider nonlinear associations among psychological variables.* Block revives in this article the tooseldom acknowledged distinction by Jane Loevinger between "cumulative" and "differential" scale measurement. The distinction amounts to the contrast between linear and nonlinear (typically curvilinear) relations. Thus, for example, Extraversion may be good but too much Extraversion can be as much of a problem as too little. Block develops this psychological argument, in the article, for each of the Big Five. An extreme position at *either* end of these traits can entail problems for living.

5. *Lay language is not a sufficient basis for psychological theory.* Block expresses a deep skepticism for the fundamental assumption of the lexical approach to personality, which is that if a psychological attribute is important then ordinary language will have developed a word—or many words—for it. At the same time, he expresses doubts about the ability of lay observers to accurately rate the personalities of their peers. Although in the target article these two arguments are conjoined, I'd prefer to separate them, I suppose because I agree with one of them more than the other.

On one the hand, although conceptualizing personality in everyday terms has some important advantages (Funder, 1991), surely psychological theorists have an obligation earn their keep by going beyond what everybody knows, explicitly or implicitly via language. On the other hand, there now seems ample evidence in the literature that untrained but intelligent and conscientious nonpsychologists can accurately rate the personalities of their peers using CAQ items, no less (e.g., Funder, 1995), and even accurately detect signs of personality disorder (Oltmanns & Turkheimer, 2009). This was a topic Jack Block and I discussed more than once. He seemed willing to not object too much to me asking lay raters to use the Q-sort, but he clearly wasn't entirely comfortable with the practice. His feeling was, and remained: this is a job best left to professionals. Don't try it at home.

6. *Good psychological research is not easy to do.* Block is critical in the target article of investigators who choose the easy route to data gathering, such as uncritically moving easily-gathered online responses into computer-analyzable data sets without having to actually meet or deal with their research subjects directly. As he says, there may "be a compelling seductiveness to many investigators of convenience per se" (p. 10). Block and his wife and collaborator, Jeanne, themselves, over the years of their longitudinal studies, developed many painstaking behavioral measures of personality—measures that required direct (and expensive) interactions between researchers and subjects.

In fairness, few psychologists run laboratories with large staffs or budgets and should hardly be criticized for gathering the data that they *can* obtain. But the fact remains that easy-to-gather self-reports are overused, to the exclusion of other methods, throughout personality *and* social psychology (Baumeister, Vohs, & Funder, 2007). To change this situation requires not just

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a critique of easy self-report methods but also encouragement, research support, and publication preference for research that goes further and includes direct behavioral observation.

7. *Openness to Experience may be a key psychological variable.* To psychologists who have been reading Jack Block's work for years, this might be the most surprising aspect of the target article. Despite his vigorous and unrelenting critique of the FFA, he comes out as something close to an actual fan of McCrae and Costa's (e.g., 1997) specific conceptualization of Openness to Experience, even redescribing it as characterizing individuals who are "high on imaginativeness, aesthetically resonant, attentive to inner feelings, preferring variety, [and] intellectually curious"[2] (p. 10). He argues strongly for separating this trait from Intellect or intelligence. He ties it to a higher order organization of personality above the Big Five, called "alpha" and "beta" by Digman (1997), and "stability" and "plasticity" by DeYoung, Peterson, and Higgins (2002), but for which he prefers the Piagetian terms assimilation and accommodation, as mentioned above.

I found Block's discussion of Openness fascinating, both in the many lines of implication he drew between this trait, biology, cognition, experience, and life outcomes and for the sheer eloquence with which he wrote about it. I think we get close to the core of what Block cared deeply about as a psychologist and as a person when we read about the way he cherished Openness, and openness:

> Openness ... may be felt by an unrestrained, intensified, *in*pouring of feeling during perception, thought, or behavior; it facilitates a sudden, intuitive understanding of the meaning or possibilities of something. ... Some instances: observing a modern dancer's fluid and opportune grace; deeply registering a suddenly transfixing poetic line or metaphor or trope; reverential awe when beholding nature ...; introspections after giving birth or cradling a child one has fathered; the lability and intense perception of the mescaline experience; true empathy (not sympathy) felt with another; the love/sex experience; the reach and touch of art; piquant, non-linear thinking that may go astray from its "sensible" path; fragile ikebono floral arrangements; the sensuality involved in transforming a lump of clay into a self-made pot; the sheer joy suffusing moments of effective athleticism; the heightened exoticism of foreign travel; creative efforts that anticipate and then fit previously unverbalizable expectations; the absorptions of meditation; the need to add a unique personalizing touch or flair to one's surroundings—one's attire, one's "style," one's avocations; the evocative memory of smells arising after a long-delayed rain; the emanation of improvisation in response to sinuous jazz; playful, explorative, ready engagement; unhurried sentience; one's capturing by the straits and cumulativeness of Beethoven's 9th symphony or by listening to a soaring Pavarotti aria. (p. 20)

This passage is not merely an exposition of a psychological construct; it is a paean to the experience of life itself.

[2]He further notes that "such unusually perceiving, kaleidoscopically attentive individuals may be naïve, mundane, and even psychotic. But they do exist in large number" (p. 19). Perhaps they do, in Berkeley. I have not met very many in Riverside.

Note

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