

The Emperor has no clothes: a response to comments on Beekman and Jordan

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Our criticism of the field of personality research focuses on 2 main points: 1) studies are frequently descriptive and lack testable hypotheses and 2) where they do quantify behavior and apply rigorous analysis, they cease to be “personality” research as they rely so heavily on existing fields as to be subsumed by them. In his reply, [Dingemans \(2017\)](#) agrees with our first criticism and continues to illustrate our second point by arguing that personality research has adapted quantitative approaches to understand within-individual variation. Although debate continues as to the appropriate quantitative methods (e.g., [Brommer 2013](#)), and whether they are achievable, such approaches are nevertheless worthwhile. Where we disagree is the extent to which a continuing focus on “personality” is necessary to answer questions of interest. [Bell \(2017\)](#) argues that personality research is uniquely concerned with the maintenance of variation and that such variation is unexpected as natural selection should remove it from populations. Darwin pondered over this exact question, not knowing how traits inherit from parent to offspring, but Mendelian and quantitative genetics now provide thorough answers to why this variation is expected. To state that empirical evidence from “non-personality” studies is difficult to obtain is misleading to say the least, given the number of studies we mentioned in our original paper, which represent only a few examples from a larger body of work. [Bell \(2017\)](#) further incorrectly claims we invoke Morgan’s canon to claim that personality studies assume “higher psychological processes.” Instead we argue that the personality label does not add anything and should therefore be abandoned.

[Briffa \(2017\)](#) feels we do not understand the meaning of “personality,” thus reminding us of Humpty Dumpty’s quote at the beginning of [Pruitt’s \(2017\)](#) response. We are not concerned with the meaning of the word “personality”—as [Pruitt \(2017\)](#) correctly states, a terminological debate could be had in any field, but we feel would be dull regardless. Rather, we argue against the need for a “new” conceptual framework in our current or future understanding of variation in animal behavior, whatever it is called. Such frameworks already exist and piggybacking the term “personality” onto them provides no new insight. The claim that the framework and terminology are useful for brevity or as bridges among studies also falls flat, as terms like “bold” need to be secondarily defined to describe what is actually measured.

According to [Sih \(2017\)](#), personality research focuses on the “why” question, but to argue that no field before was concerned with such questions is simply untrue. To see this, one can start in the 1960s when [Niko Tinbergen \(1963\)](#) framed his 4 questions and continue from there. In fact, [Briffa \(2017\)](#) invokes Tinbergen to argue that asking questions about individual variation is interesting, a point, we must again emphasize, we never disputed. Although it may be true that the field of behavioral ecology was traditionally focused on average behavior (“tyranny of the golden mean”), modern implementation of more sophisticated tools to make sense of observed variation extenuate this limitation. This brings us to our main criticism, which largely goes unaddressed in the comments on our paper; the fact that now personality research has moved away from merely describing behavior, to actually understanding the mechanisms behind behavior, it ceases

to exist because it is no longer distinct from existing fields of research. Hence, although we agree with Jungwirth et al. (2017) that the term “personality” serves as a placeholder or “black box,” our criticism goes further as we claim that even when the mechanisms are known, many researchers dogmatically continue to invoke personality despite it adding nothing to understanding the underlying mechanisms, or being testable in an hypothesis-driven manner. It is for this reason we feel a similar sense of *déjà vu* to Sih—these issues abound in the literature despite claims they have been solved (Dingemanse 2017).

In summary, we do not claim that the questions personality research asks are invalid—they are questions of universal interest in behavioral ecology. We object to the claim that the field of personality is justified because it addresses novel questions that are beyond remit of existing fields. It is not, and does not. As the parabolic innocent proclaimed “The Emperor has no clothes!”.

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