

Why Identities Fluctuate: Variability in traits is a function of  
situational variations in autonomy support

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### Abstract

Interest in traits and variations in their expression has burgeoned, with researchers increasingly interested in the nature and impact of within-person variations in traits. In this article we review this literature with an emphasis on a) appropriate methods for identifying trait variation, and b) the substantive meaning and sources of this variation. Self-determination theory suggests that people will express different traits as a function of the degree of support for autonomy they experience in any given setting. Accordingly, autonomy support is shown to predict variations in big five traits and other stable individual differences such as attachment security and dependency. The discussion focuses on methodological issues in the study of variability, and on why autonomy-support, which concerns the support for true expression of the self, plays such a central role in explaining trait variability and its impact.

Personality psychology has long been concerned with the concept of traits as stable individual differences, and has assessed the relative importance of these dispositions for behavior and personal functioning (McCrae & Costa, 1991). Yet, as trait research has developed, considerable evidence has emerged showing that at a within-person level of analysis there is considerable variation in traits over time, situations or contexts (Baird, Le & Lucas, 2006; Funder & Colvin, 1991). In addition, some research suggests that people may also reliably differ in the mean level of such variability—that is people can be understood as having individual differences in trait variability itself (e.g., Fleeson, 2004; Kernis, 2003; Roberts & Donahue, 1994;). Given this evidence for both the relative stability and variability of trait expressions, and the trait like nature of variability itself, our understanding of personality has shifted from person-situation debates that pit the explanatory power of individual differences and situational factors against one another (Block, 1961, 1968; Mischel, 1968) toward examining how different levels of analysis inform each other about the ways in which traits influence behavior and well being.

Yet as the literature on traits and variability has evolved, there are several questions that have come to the forefront and continue to evoke considerable attention in the literature. The first concerns the nature of variability, and how to most appropriately assess it. Other questions concern the processes that best explain why trait-like features of personality are differentially expressed at the level of the situation. Still others concern the outcomes that are appropriate to each level of analysis and understanding the extent to which stability and variability of trait expressions relate to these outcomes. Finally some theorists question whether the processes that explain stability and variation, and their relations to outcomes, hold across cultures versus whether consistency is merely a hallmark of wellness in western cultures. The aim of this paper

is to address these and related questions concerning trait variability both methodologically and substantively.

To presage our thesis, we shall first suggest that despite some early findings in the literature associating variability in trait expressions across contexts with poorer mental health, our recent analyses suggest that when variability *per se* is appropriately assessed it is largely unrelated to wellness outcomes (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman & Deci, 2000; La Guardia, 2001). Nonetheless, we still find evidence of substantial variability of trait expressions, which we argue is highly systematic. Specifically, in our view people reliably vary in their manifest traits as a function of the support for psychological needs they experience across different settings. We focus especially on autonomy support, which in a number of studies has been associated with more positive trait manifestations, and more optimal functioning (La Guardia, 2005; La Guardia, Lynch, & Ryan, 2006; Lynch, La Guardia, & Ryan, 2006). Studies employing diverse cultural samples further suggest that these connections between within-person variability in traits and autonomy-supportive contexts are not culturally specific. Before turning to these substantive issues, however, let us first discuss some of the methodological aspects of research on variability, beginning with an understanding of trait stability, variability, and the processes that might explain them.

#### Trait stability and variability: Methodological considerations

Research in personality can be characterized by the relative level of personal and situational breadth addressed, with the broadest studies examining trait levels across situations or cultures and the most narrow examining thoughts, feelings, and behaviors within a given situation (Roberts and Pomerantz, 2004). While in the past, person and situation levels of inquiry were viewed as either unrelated or contradictory (Cross and Markus, 1999; Mischel &

Shoda, 1995; Pervin, 1994), researchers now attempt to understand how findings at each level can complement the other (Baird et al., 2006; Caspi & Roberts, 1999, 2001; 2005; Funder & Colvin, 1991; Roberts, Caspi, & Moffitt, 2001).

Fleeson (2001), for example, suggested that trait expressions within any given person are best represented as density distributions, showing both stability in mean levels of traits as well as variation in trait expressions across time or situations. Thus for any given person their behavior potentially embodies a frequency distribution around his or her own mean for each trait, such that across time or situations the person will be somewhat higher in a given trait (e.g., extraversion) and at other times somewhat lower relative to his or her own mean. Using interpersonal trust as an illustration, Fleeson and Leicht (2005) showed that people varied in their level of trust from one interaction to the next (calculated by taking the standard deviation across interactions). Yet, people also maintained a relatively stable mean level of trust over interactions (calculated by dividing their own data randomly and correlating across the two halves; average stability:  $r = .80$ ). Fleeson and Leicht suggested that variations in trust corresponded with the with type of relationship encountered, such that more “intimate” relationships (family, best friend, romantic partner) were associated with greater trust than less “intimate” relationships (e.g., friend, acquaintance, stranger). Fleeson and Leicht’s (2005) study thus demonstrates at a methodological level that there is considerable situational variability as well as considerable stability in trait expressions. It also suggests that qualities of a relationship (e.g., degree of intimacy or connection) can be meaningfully related to variations in trait expression, and predictive of important relational quality outcomes. Subsequently we shall argue that there are some more specific relationship-based predictors of trait variability, but before turning to these

substantive formulations, we first need to understand more about what constitutes variability, and how it can be assessed.

*Assessing personality variability, and relating it to outcomes*

Clearly the study of stability and variability in personality traits requires that researchers a) appropriately define and assess variability; and b) attend to both global and proximal levels of analysis, such that broad level traits can be related to global measures (e.g., well-being), and situation level trait expressions related to more proximal measures of functioning (e.g., satisfaction with partner).

One of the main issues is that global outcomes such as well-being are typically analyzed as a function of either stability estimates (e.g., mean level; coefficient alpha) or variability estimates [e.g., standard deviation, self-concept differentiation (SCD)]. However, mean level and variability of traits are correlated (Baird, Le, & Lucas, 2006; La Guardia, 2001), and thus without stepwise or simultaneous estimation of stability and variability, effects will likely overestimate each contribution to well-being outcomes.

What does this mean? Stability effects concern how the general level of trait expression impacts well-being. For example, high neuroticism might predict greater negative affect and risk for psychopathology. Variability reflects how much one fluctuates in the expression of a trait from relationship to relationship (relational variation), situation to situation (situational variation), or even moment to moment (temporal variation). For example, a person may be more neurotic in some settings or relationships than others. The important issue, then, is to understand what fosters the fluctuation of traits. Potentially even more interesting is to understand how these two parameters interact. For example, it may be the case that those who are high on neuroticism but also fluctuate quite widely in the expression of this trait (high negative affect in

some relationships and less so in others) may have the worse overall well-being relative to all others. Of the extant research, rarely are these effects modeled simultaneously and even less common is a model of their interaction.

In prior work, many studies relating variability to personal health and well-being have suggested that variability in trait expression across roles is associated with poorer psychological and physical health (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997; Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003). For example, Donahue and colleagues (Donahue et al., 1993; Roberts & Donahue, 1994) assessed the relations of variability in traits across different social roles and found that variation in trait ratings across different social roles is associated with lower well-being. Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, and Ilardi (1997) expanded on this model by demonstrating significant variation in big five traits across different life roles (e.g., employee, student, child), and in line with the earlier work by Donahue and colleagues, found that the more people varied from role to role in the traits displayed, the lower their well-being. Subsequently, Cross, Gore, and Morris (2003) also found support for this relation, and Suh (2002) extended the study of this variability effect into cross-cultural samples, again finding the variability to well-being link despite mean level differences in trait and well-being estimates across countries.

In each of these studies described, although variation per se predicted lower well-being, the contribution of the mean level of each trait was not assessed simultaneously. Thus, the stability or consistency of the trait, was not accounted for in relation to overall well-being outcomes. Let's more specifically examine the Donahue et al. (1993) study as an example of the ramifications of this procedure. Donahue et al (1993) modeled their estimate of self-concept differentiation (SCD) on Block's (1961) factor analytic procedure. In this procedure, participant's ratings on 60 Big Five trait adjectives for each of five roles (son/daughter,

employee, friend, romantic partner, student) were intercorrelated, resulting in a 5 X 5 correlation matrix (or 10 correlation coefficients representing the comparison between pairs of each of the 5 roles). Estimates were then subjected to a principal components factor analysis, with the first principal component representing the shared variance across the five roles and the remaining variance used as an index of SCD. Similarly, Sheldon et al (1997) and Cross et al (2003) used these same basic procedures to obtain SCD estimates, while Suh (2002) used the first principal component as an indicator of consistency rather than indexing inconsistency.

The SCD index estimates trait pattern similarity across roles without providing much information about specific trait levels (mean) or how the traits cluster in patterns. For example, it is conceivable that one person's trait profile clusters in two very distinct but separate patterns (e.g., work and student in one cluster pattern and friend and romantic partner in another cluster). The patterning of data would yield a large first principle component and thus a very small SCD score, yet this person would not be consistent in trait expressions across the full range of roles. Also, with patterning as yielded by a principle components factor analysis, it is conceivable that a person could show high levels of neuroticism across various roles and similarity in the patterning level of extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness across roles. This person's patterning would reflect consistency, or again, low SCD. Predictions about SCD would suggest that low SCD would reflect consistency and should confer greater well-being. However, this seems to be the opposite of what would be predicted by the pattern described. Indeed, we would expect that greater mean levels of some traits (such as neuroticism) across all situations or relationships may bring with it greater challenges to well-being than might be conferred by variation in this trait. Indeed, researchers have found that trait levels of neuroticism

have important implications for level and variation in interpersonal behavior (Moskowitz & Zuroff, 2004).

Notably, Donahue et al. (1993) offered an alternative index to estimate differences between role identities. This alternative estimate is computed by taking the standard deviation of each trait item across the five roles and then averaging these estimates across the 60 attributes. This index is highly correlated with the SCD index, and the substantive results of their study were similar using the two indices. However, if the SCD and standard deviation estimates are essentially equivalent, this amounts to assessing variability without considering the contribution of the relative level (or mean) of any given trait.

As it stands, the majority of research assessing trait expressions to well-being does not help us to understand how general (mean level) and situational (variations over setting or time) of personality traits together predict well-being. This is because the past studies have not deconfounded the two issues. Thus in our recent work we have focused on variability in traits after controlling for mean level of traits, as this truly isolates the variability phenomenon per se (e.g., La Guardia, 2005; La Guardia, Lynch, & Ryan, 2006). As we shall show, variability per se does not seem to be problematic for mental health, but it is indicative of important features of situations which can teach us a lot about the dynamics of trait expression, and their relations with well-being.

For example, La Guardia et al. (2000) illustrated how both individual differences and within person variations in attachment security related to well-being. First, they found that individual differences in attachment security were significantly related to well-being, such that those who stylistically embodied greater security in attachment have higher well-being. When this individual difference or what might be considered the mean or average level of attachment

security was simultaneously regressed with variation in attachment security (calculated by taking the standard deviation of attachment ratings across close relationships) onto well-being, variability generally did not emerge as significantly related to well-being. Across three studies, after meta-analytically combining results, only variability in “model of other” was negatively related to well-being, whereas variability in overall attachment security and working models of self were not. It was also the case that attachment security, both at mean levels and in specific relationships, was predictive of greater well being. Notably, as predicted by SDT, this association between attachment security and well-being was substantially mediated by need satisfaction. That is, among the principal reasons that attachment security relates to well-being is that secure attachments provide an arena in which persons are able to satisfy their basic psychological needs.

These results that suggest that variability per se does not negatively predict wellness did not seem to match the findings pattern described by in Donahue et al. and others in the literature. Yet, if we consider that the La Guardia et al. study simultaneously assessed mean level and variability effects on well-being whereas previous studies had not, the results seem to make even more sense. That is, the procedures used by LaGuardia et al control for the mean level of the trait in question, rendering the variability of attachment per se generally non-significant as a predictor of overall well being. We shall subsequently describe similar findings from other studies of traits, including big five traits, and people tendencies toward dependence. However, for the moment our point is merely that when we assess variability per se, separated from the effects of trait levels, it does not appear to yield the negative outcomes some have assumed.

Our own findings were recently confirmed by Baird, Le and Lucas (2006). They compared three methods of assessing variability, namely the SCD method described by Donahue

and colleagues, the standard deviation method they also employed and was employed by Sheldon et al (1997), and finally the standard deviation after controlling for mean levels of traits. This final method is most ideal for differentiating within-person trait variability per se from the effects of trait levels. What Baird et al. found is that only when trait mean levels were not controlled did variability predict poorer well-being. Yet, variability per se was unrelated to well being in most analyses. Moreover, their analyses suggest that variability is itself somewhat trait-like in its nature (Fleeson, 2004). Some people, that is, are more variable than others, but this attribute is, in itself, neither a marker of health nor pathonomic.

The implications of both our recent findings and those of Baird et al (2006) are manifold. By showing both that there is considerable within person variability in trait expressions, and that this variability is not itself problematic, the findings suggest that theories of personality should not equate stability or consistency with wellness (Ryan, 1993). Instead the data suggests that we need to think differently about variability. Perhaps, in fact, such data should have us look more closely at what drives variability from situation to situation. For a substantive account of what makes people change, we turn now to Self-determination theory.

#### From Methods to Substance: The role of autonomy-support in trait expressions

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2001) is a theory of personality and motivation that describes individual differences in people's orientations to the environment and tendencies to engage in behavior. SDT also defines how social contexts support the expression of these tendencies, and outlines the consequences of these factors for important tasks of growth and development. The central concept that helps frame individual differences, situational variation, and growth within SDT is that of *basic psychological needs*.

SDT outlines three basic psychological needs---autonomy, competence, and relatedness--as the central constituents for healthy psychological development. Relatedness concerns feelings of connection and belongingness with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000), competence refers to feeling effective in one's actions and capable of meeting the challenges of everyday life (White, 1959), and autonomy concerns a sense of volition and a willing engagement in one's behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1987; 2000). Although the expression of autonomy, competence and relatedness needs may vary at different points in development and may vary from culture to culture, a rich body of evidence has shown that satisfaction of these needs within varied contexts, domains, and relationships is salient across the lifespan (La Guardia & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & La Guardia, 2000).

Environments can vary significantly in the extent to which they are need supportive (see Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2004 for reviews). The extent to which important environments or relationships are need supportive has implications for optimal growth and functioning across the lifespan (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryan & La Guardia, 2000), such that to the extent that needs are satisfied people are expected to function effectively and develop in a healthy way while showing evidence of ill-being and non-optimal functioning when inadequately fulfilled. Importantly then, it is not simply the person or the situation that is important, but the dialectic or dynamic interplay between the person and the social context that is the basis for predictions about behavior, experience, and development, and well-being.

Specifically, with regards to traits, we suggest that to understand why a person might show differences in trait expressions in different relational contexts, we must understand how well the relational context supports the individual's psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001). As autonomy is

seemingly the most controversial need from a cross-cultural perspective (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003), we more specifically focus on the role of autonomy support herein, though all three needs are important (see, e.g., La Guardia et al, 2000). Moreover, because support for autonomy concerns support for “being oneself” it is particularly meaningful as a predictor of trait expression, and its variation (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Stated differently, we suspect that when one is in a context where one feels controlled or pressured to conform, trait attributes that depart from one’s trait nature are more likely to be expressed.

*Autonomy* literally means “rule by the self” and, as previously mentioned, a person is autonomous when his or her behavior is willingly enacted and endorsed (Ryan, 1993). The opposite of autonomy is heteronomy, and implies feeling compelled, pressured or forced to behave in particular ways. Thus autonomy-support concerns an atmosphere in which one is not pressured to be a specific way, and instead one is supported to authentically express and be oneself (Ryan & Deci, 2004). In this sense autonomy-support directly concerns the issue of what one manifests relative to “who one is”, and the greatest discrepancies between abiding traits and situationally displayed personality characteristics should occur when autonomy-support is low.

Importantly, in SDT terms, autonomy is not equated with independence or individualism. Indeed, autonomy is seen as orthogonal to both independence and individualism, in that a person can be willingly or unwillingly dependent on another (Ryan, LaGuardia, Solky-Butzel, Chirkov & Kim, 2005) and may be inclusive of the other within one’s self-concept without sacrificing volition (Chirkov, Ryan, Kim, & Kaplan, 2003). This theoretical distinction cannot be emphasized enough. Some researchers who equate autonomy with independence suggest that autonomy may not be important or valued within some cultures, such as in traditionally collectivist cultures in which it is normative to have others included in self-conceptualizations

and intimately considered in choices about how to behave (Cross & Gore, 2003; Iyengar & DeVoe, 2003; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996; Miller, 1997; Oishi, 2000). When autonomy is defined as individualism, it is negatively related to well-being, however, when defined as willing engagement as in SDT, autonomy is related to greater psychological health and adjustment. This, without clearly differentiating these terms, predictions about autonomy and its relation to well-being can be readily confounded.

Research in the SDT tradition has specifically demonstrated how the concept of psychological needs and situational supports for them can more broadly account for stability and variation in trait-like propensities. For example, as we previously mentioned, La Guardia, et al. (2000) showed that *attachment security* varies significantly, even across close relational partners (e.g., mother, father, romantic partner, best friend), and that variations in attachment security are systematically associated with relationship specific need satisfaction such that greater attachment security was found in those relationships that were more need supportive. With regards to *big – five personality traits*, Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, and Ilardi (1997) assessed how trait expressions vary across important roles (e.g. son/daughter, school, friend). In roles where people felt they could be more authentic or “truly themselves”, they reported feeling less neurotic, and more extraverted, agreeable, conscientious, and open relative to their general or overall level of trait expression. Finally, Ryan et al. (2005) looked at within person variations in *emotional reliance*, and found that people’s willingness to rely on others in emotional times was a function of partner specific autonomy support.

What these studies suggest is that variability is meaningful, such that people may feel or behave differently in relationships or roles in which needs are differentially supported. In fact, these studies show that more optimal trait expressions are manifest within circumstances where

one experiences support for autonomy. When with others who support one's autonomy one feels more securely attached, and more willing to depend on the other. Moreover, in terms of big-five traits one is more likely to feel open, extraverted, agreeable, conscientious and less neurotic when in a situation that conduces to autonomy and authenticity.

Based on this SDT model, we recently examined people's general endorsement of big five trait expressions as well as their relative expression of these traits within important relationships (La Guardia, Lynch, Ryan, 2006; Lynch, La Guardia, & Ryan, 2006). We present a detailed overview of this study as it illustrates a) the importance of distinguishing mean level traits from variability; b) the importance of measuring both global and situational outcomes; and c) the strong impact of autonomy support in within person variability in trait expressions across different cultures.

Six hundred forty two students from universities in the U.S., Russia, and China completed measures assessing the extent to which they perceive themselves to demonstrate Big Five traits generally, as well as the extent to which they express these traits within specific relationships to their mother, father, romantic partner, best friend, roommate, and teacher. Autonomy support was assessed as a process to understand both stability and variation. Composite measures of positive well-being (positive affect, life satisfaction, vitality) and negative well-being (negative affect, risk for depression, anxiety, and physical symptoms) were utilized as indicators of global psychological health, while satisfaction and energy for each relationship were used as proximal indicators of relational functioning. Finally, to assess the influence of culture, a widely used measure of cultural orientation on dimensions of independence and interdependence was used (Singelis, 1994), yielding estimates of the extent to which a person places priority on the individual or the group within one's self-concept

Measurement models using means and covariance structure analyses (MACS; Little, 1997, 2000) analyses suggested that the constructs assessed were comparable across cultures. On average, participants from both China and Russia rated themselves as less extraverted, agreeable, and open than those from the United States. However, across all cultural groups, our data indicated significant stability of trait self-ratings across partners, as well as significant variability across partners. Further, mean and variability were often significantly related to each other. For example, in the U.S., higher mean levels of neuroticism were associated with greater fluctuations in neuroticism across relationships, and higher mean levels of extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were associated with lower fluctuations in these trait expressions across relationships. Chinese and Russian participants also showed relations of the mean and variability for neuroticism, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, but did not show significant associations for extraversion and openness. Thus, in line with previous research and a density distribution approach to personality, there is evidence for both personality stability and variation, and some links between these distributional indices.

Next, we assessed autonomy support as a process that might help understand this trait variation. Overall, U.S. students reported receiving greater autonomy support than Russian and Chinese participants, a result consistent with previous research showing lower levels of autonomy support amongst participants from traditionally mixed or collectivist societies (e.g., Chirkov & Ryan, 2001). Despite this mean level difference, autonomy support was also found to relate significantly to trait expression and relational outcomes. To assess these relations, autonomy-support ratings within the relationship were regressed from trait residual scores. The residual approach regressing the mean level out of relationship-specific measures, thereby creating scores that indicate the direction and extent to which a person expresses a given trait in a

particular relationship. Again, this residual reflects the density distribution approach, as it demonstrates variation in trait expression away from one's own mean. Results showed that when people depart from their baseline or general trait expressions they deviate in a direction that is in line with autonomy support from their partners. That is, the more autonomy supportive the relationship, the more the person feels extraverted, agreeable, open, conscientious and less neurotic relative to his or her own general profile on these traits. Furthermore, the more autonomy supportive people experienced their relationship partners to be, the more positively they rated the quality of that relationship (as indicated by greater satisfaction and vitality for the relationship). Thus, in line with prior work within the SDT tradition, autonomy support is an important indicator for how people engage their relational partners.

With regard to culture, Chinese participants considered themselves to be more interdependent than independent, while both Russian and U.S. participants considered themselves to be more independent than interdependent. U.S. students were more independent than either Russian or Chinese students, but they were also significantly interdependent as well, at levels similar to their Chinese counterparts. Thus, if we simply categorized participants by country membership in terms of the independent and interdependent dimensions, we would overemphasize these dimensions in some cases and under-emphasize their cultural importance in other cases. Interestingly, we found that neither independent nor interdependent self-construals moderated the associations between autonomy support and trait expressions or between autonomy support and self-reported relationship quality. What this seems to suggest is that cultural orientation does not qualify the relation of autonomy support to more positive trait expressions, or relational well being outcomes.

Notably, the relation of trait expression to well-being was significantly affected by simultaneously regressing the mean and variability estimates, and these results differed by culture. The effects on positive well-being indices (PWB) rested largely on the contribution of the mean, such that higher PWB was associated with lower neuroticism and greater extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. This was true across the three countries, with the exception found in Russia in which the mean level of conscientiousness was not significantly related to PWB. Thus, in general, the standard deviation (variability) did not contribute significantly to estimates of positive well-being once controlling for the mean. The picture for negative well-being (NWB) was more complex. In the U.S. sample, when both the mean and standard deviation were in the equation to predict NWB, results indicated that negative mental health outcomes were associated with lower mean levels of extraversion and higher mean levels of neuroticism. Importantly, the variability effect was no longer significant once we accounted for the mean level of these traits. In the Chinese sample, the mean exerted the most prominent effect on negative mental health outcomes, such that NWB was associated with greater neuroticism and lower extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Finally in the Russian sample, when both the mean and standard deviation were in the equation to predict NWB, the effect of variability continued to play a role in NWB but the mean did not. The mean level was in fact only significant for neuroticism, suggesting that greater overall neuroticism is associated with more negative mental health. Thus, while in the U.S. and China, the mean level of trait indicators followed predictable patterns (with greater neuroticism and lower extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness associated with more negative well-being indicators), in the Russian sample, neuroticism exerted a unique mean level influence on negative well-being

indices, with greater action in negative well-being indicators found in the variability of extraversion and conscientiousness.

In sum, a central purpose of this recent study was to demonstrate the relation of trait expression, autonomy support, and personal and relational outcomes across diverse cultural groups. We found evidence of stability as well as variability in trait expressions and linked these to autonomy support within relationships. In terms of outcomes, trait means showed greater power in predicting well-being over and above effects of variation, and this generally held across cultural groups. Stated differently, the costs to well-being are often subsumed by the trait experiences of greater neuroticism, and lower extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness overall, and are not generally indicated by variability per se. An understanding of cultural differences in these patterns remains unclear, although this again reserves room for future debate.

We have outlined a variety of issues in the debates about stability and variability that can be summarized as follows: First, it is clear that both individual differences and within person variations are important topics of study. Second, past research has focused on variability and suggested that variability may itself be a negative predictor of well being outcomes. Yet, our analyses suggest that often times this negative effect of variability is actually the result of a confound, such that when mean levels of traits are controlled the variability effect disappears (see also Baird et al., 2006). Third, as we move beyond methodological concerns to substantive issues, we suggest that to date few researchers have forwarded theories of what specific factors within situations and relationships actually lead to or predict departures, positively or negatively, from one's trait levels of functioning. Yet, drawing on self-determination theory, we point to growing evidence that the presence of autonomy support may be a critical psychological variable

for predicting within person variations in traits as diverse as the big-five, attachment security, or interpersonal trust and dependence, within and across cultural groups.

### Conclusions

Although people can be meaningfully described in terms of trait like differences in personality functioning, it is clear that individuals vary considerably in the characteristics they display from setting to setting, or relationship to relationship. The fact of this evident “within-person” variability initially led some investigators to look at variability itself as a characteristic that predicts well being. Initial evidence by Donahue et al (1993), Sheldon et al (1997), Suh (2002) and others led to the suspicion that variability is itself a problem in adjustment, even apart from ones specific traits. However, both our own data (e.g., La Guardia et al., 2000; La Guardia et al., 2006) and that of others (e.g., Baird et al., 2006) suggests that many of these variability effects are only apparent when the mean level of the traits in question is not controlled. That is, because variability is itself associated with traits such as neuroticism, it is often not a significant factor in the prediction of adjustment once these traits are considered. At the same time, none of that evidence contradicts the fact that a) there is considerable within person variability in the expression of traits, and b) that variability is systematic rather than random.

We further asserted that, to date, despite the strong interest in identifying variability and its effects per se, there has been very little progress in providing a substantive account of this considerable within person variability. In this regard, however, we reviewed the position of Self-determination theory, which suggests that contextual supports for autonomy play a critical role in determining the direction and magnitude of a persons variability away from his/her mean level of a given trait in a given context. As personality researchers we might remind ourselves that our

understanding of variability lies in the interpersonal context. Under more autonomy supportive conditions a person is more open, conscientious, extraverted and agreeable relative to their own mean, and when they feel controlled they become more closed, less caring and agreeable, less outgoing and energetic, and more tense and neurotic. Similarly, with respect to other traits we showed that when people are with an autonomy supportive partner they are more secure and trusting than their general security might indicate, and more insecure with those who control them. When they are with an autonomy supportive partner people are also more willingly dependent than trait levels would suggest. Indeed, the evidence thus far suggests that autonomy support conduces to a more optimal level of trait functioning, across a variety of trait attributes.

The reason for this importance of autonomy support is of course both simple, and complex. Put simply, autonomy concerns the expression of self, and people are more apt to express and act in accord with their true selves when their autonomy is being supported. This means they will act more in accord with who they volitionally and authentically are. By contrast in setting where one feels controlled by others, one will not show one's true self, and may be more likely to react by departing from more ideal trait expressions. Thus when controlled people may indeed feel less outgoing, open and agreeable, and certainly less secure. In fact, we assert that when people think about their trait selves they typically think of themselves as they are when they are acting autonomously, and thus there is greater discrepancy between general traits and situated trait expressions the more the interpersonal setting fails to support autonomy.

In sum, the exploration of within person variability has opened up some unique and intriguing puzzles in personality. At this point researchers have moved beyond pitting traits against situations, instead focusing more on the degree to which situational behaviors reflect the stable traits that truly do describe people. As we understand more and more about the dynamic

factors that move people to act either in accord with, or in contrast to, their abiding tendencies, we see more and more the critical role played by psychological needs. It seems ever more clear that contexts that support autonomy and thus allow one to “be oneself” are those that allow people to exhibit their trait selves, and it is in such circumstances that people are able to most optimally function and experience well being.

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