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# Integrating the most unintuitive empirical observations of 2007 in the domain of personality and social psychology into a unified framework

Simon A. Moss\*, Samuel Wilson

*School of Psychology, Psychiatry, and Psychological Medicine, Monash University, Caulfield East, Vic. 3145, Australia*

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### ABSTRACT

Two obstacles impede the development of productive theories in personality, social, and organizational psychology. First, the distinct frameworks are seldom integrated; the various theories sometimes yield incompatible implications. Second, because many findings in these fields seem intuitive, these observations do not augment the validity of these theories. To override these issues, this paper integrates the 70 most unintuitive findings of 2007 into a unified framework, derived from personality systems interaction theory. Specifically, 10 participants extracted the most unintuitive observations from 17 scholarly journals. These findings were reconciled within a single framework that generates 41 testable propositions. The framework assumes that an associative self system, underpinned by a vast network of schemas, governs behavior as well as enhances intuition, engagement, creativity, and cooperation. When individuals experience a threat, this system is inhibited, unless the requisite defense mechanisms to accommodate potential hazards have been developed. Furthermore, individuals attempt to distance themselves from unassailable threats, which activate an analytical system that formulates plans that could accommodate future contingencies. These plans are retained in memory or executed if individuals have acquired sufficient confidence.

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\* Corresponding author. Fax: +61 3 9903 2501.

E-mail address: [simon.moss@med.monash.edu.au](mailto:simon.moss@med.monash.edu.au) (S.A. Moss).

## 1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, a plethora of fruitful theories have emerged in the fields of personality, social, and organizational psychology. Some of the most prominent advances include construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2003), regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 2000), relational frame theory (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), selective accessibility (Mussweiler, 2003), self categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), self determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the sociometer hypothesis (Leary, 1999), terror management theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991), and the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991). Two factors, however, constrain the utility of these developments. First, these theories have not been integrated into a unified framework. As a consequence, the various theories might characterize distinct mechanisms that operate concurrently but generate conflicting predictions.

To illustrate, consider a manager who prescribes specific duties, precluding employees from pursuing their own goals. According to the concept of regulatory fit, propounded by Higgins (2000), these employees will adopt a prevention focus—a motivation to satisfy obligations rather than fulfill aspirations. This orientation fosters a sense of concordance, which ultimately promotes engagement, provided the task of these employees is to minimize errors and not to maximize progress. In contrast, according to the theory of self determination (Deci & Ryan, 1985), these employees would be less inclined to experience an autonomous motivation and, hence, their intrinsic motivation, which is related to engagement, should decline, regardless of the task. Practitioners cannot predict which of these mechanisms is likely to prevail unless these theories are integrated.

Second, some of the observations that corroborate these theories seem almost inevitable. For example, after individuals are informed they have been excluded from a social collective, their self esteem, as measured by items such as “I often feel like a failure”, tends to decline. This finding is touted as evidence for the sociometer hypothesis (e.g., Leary, 1999; for a related perspective, see Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1997). Nevertheless, most laypersons, after receiving a description of the procedure and measures of this study, would most likely predict this association, even before the data are collected.

Findings that can be readily anticipated, even by laypersons unfamiliar with the theories, might not expedite the progress of science as rapidly as other observations. That is, observations that can be predicted by many individuals can, by definition, be explained by folk psychology—the values, attitudes, beliefs, states, and constructs that underpin everyday decisions, language, and behavior. Nevertheless, from the perspective of eliminative materialists, including Churchland (1981), such folk theories do not explain a wealth of important empirical discoveries—especially findings that transcend observable phenomena. In addition, these folk theories have not evolved significantly over recent centuries and do not cohere with other scientific disciplines (for a divergent perspective, see Crane, 2003). Accordingly, empirical observations that align to the predictions of laypersons, and thus correspond to folk psychology, are less likely to generate theories that facilitate scientific progress.

To resolve these issues, this paper presents a conceptual framework that integrates a vast range of theoretical propositions, attempting to accommodate the 70 most unintuitive observations that were published in 2007. To uncover these observations, 10 undergraduate psychology students were asked to evaluate a set of refereed articles in the fields of personality, social, and organizational psychology. Psychology students were chosen because they could all understand the abstracts, methods sections, and results sections but were unlikely to be familiar with the underlying theories and explanations.

Table 1 enumerates all the journals in which these articles were published. Every quantitative, empirical paper that was published in these journals was evaluated by at least two participants. For each paper, participants were instructed to evaluate the extent to which the key empirical findings were “surprising, diverging from common sense rather than aligning with their predictions” on a seven-point scale from predictable (1) to surprising (7). Participants were encouraged to read the abstract first. If they could not evaluate the findings from reading the abstract, they were encouraged to consult the method or results sections as well. They were discouraged from reading the introduction or discussion. If the abstract specified more than one finding, participants evaluated each observation

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