

Diagnosing and treating personality disorders needs a dynamic approach

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UC Davis psychologist Chris Hopwood wants to take a more dynamic view of personality traits and disorders. Credit: UC Davis

Someone who is "neurotic" does not necessarily show anger or anxiety in a given situation, even though those are generally accepted traits of a person with that personality style.

New University of California, Davis, research suggests that lumping those with [personality disorders](#) into a package of traits should be left behind for more dynamic analysis instead. Those who study and treat people with personality disorders need to more deeply look at personality dynamics and variation over time, not just box people into specific categories or traits.

"Just as water level could be affected by climate, tide, and weather, different levels of personality dynamics can be classified according to the timescales along which they occur," said Christopher Hopwood, a psychology professor and author of "Interpersonal Dynamics in Personality and Personality Disorders," which was published recently in the *European Journal of Personality*.

"Personality researchers are on the verge of

marrying technological advances and psychological theories to generate novel insights about why people are different and how that can go wrong," he said.

Hopwood acknowledges that there is value in clinical descriptions of personality disorders focusing on traits—which he describes as abstract concepts, averaged across situations. For instance, neuroticism includes features such as anger, impulsivity, anxiety and self-consciousness, but those traits are over-generalized and could apply to various psychopathologies.

They are poorly suited to answer specific questions about particular moments in daily life and environmental changes over time, Hopwood said.

"By analogy," Hopwood said, "although it would be more useful for a musician to understand chords (personality factors) and notes (personality facets) than to learn a few songs (personality disorder categories), this does not mean that she would not ultimately prefer a model of rhythm, melody, and key signatures (dynamics) through which she can better understand and even generate her own music."

Hopwood said this research can help improve the treatment of people with personality disorders and better their lives because:

- research on clinical personality disorders and basic or "normal" personality processes are both converging on the importance of dynamics,
- these dynamics may explain why personality features that are not adaptive stay stable, and
- understanding personality in terms of dynamics may provide more guidance for intervention, and thus close the research-practice gap.

But to realize this potential, he added, the field needs to move on from old debates and encounter the massive methodological challenges involved in studying dynamic personality processes.

More information: Christopher J. Hopwood et al. Interpersonal Dynamics in Personality and Personality Disorders, *European Journal of Personality* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/per.2155](https://doi.org/10.1002/per.2155)

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