A CONFIGURATION APPROACH TO MINDSET AGENCY THEORY

This book explains psychological, sociopolitical and organisational change in multidisciplinary settings. It shows how advanced techniques of contextual analysis can be applied to complex situations and offers a new cybernetic agency paradigm based on living systems theory. It models, diagnoses and analyses complex, real-world situations to anticipate patterns of behaviour.

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A Formative Trait Psychology with Affect, Cognition and Behaviour

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108833325
DOI: 10.1017/9781108974028

First published 2021

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Yolles, Maurice, author. | Fink, Gerhard, 1944– author.
TITLE: A configuration approach to mindset agency theory : a formative trait psychology with affect, cognition and behaviour / Maurice Yolles, Gerhard Fink.
DESCRIPTION: Cambridge ; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2020049472 (print) | LCCN 2020049473 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108833325 (hardback) | ISBN 9781108974028 (ebook)
SUBJECTS: LCSH: Personality – Social aspects. | Agent (Philosophy) | Personality and cognition. | Affect (Psychology) | Cybernetics. | Organizational change – Psychological aspects. | Organizational behavior.
CLASSIFICATION: LCC BF698.9.S63 Y65 2021 (print) | LCC BF698.9.S63 (ebook) | DDC 155.2–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020049472
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020049473

ISBN 978-1-108-83332-5 Hardback

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Foreword

Browse the internet and you can find the following cartoon: A slowly moving line of people approaches a fork in a road. A sign displays their options. Turn left for answers 'Simple but Wrong'. Turn right for answers 'Complex but Right'. Almost everyone turns left. The few brave souls who turn right pass a bookshelf, pick up reading materials, and begin a lengthy journey down a winding path that snakes its way slowly towards the horizon.

The masses who turn left walk straight off a cliff.

There is only one thing wrong with Wiley Miller's cartoon: its title, 'Science vs. Everything Else'. Like Sean Parker telling Mark Zuckerberg to 'drop the "the"', you want to tell Mr Miller to 'drop the "vs. Everything Else"'. In practice, much of science – well, at least much of personality science, the one most pertinent to this extraordinary new work by Yolles and Fink – turns to the simple. Here's an example from the first few years of this century:

- The most thorough theoretical analysis of personality systems presented in the first decade of the twenty-first century is complex; I am referring to the *Personality Systems Interaction* theory by Julius Kuhl. Kuhl's major theoretical work is his 1200-page volume *Motivation und Persönlichkeit: Interaktionen psychischer Systeme*. Google Scholar reports that it has been cited 1100 times (as much as any English-language presentation of this sophisticated theory; it is not merely 'a problem of translation').
- An alternative effort of this era was as simple as can be. 'A very brief measure of the big-five personality domains' told readers how they could measure a spectrum of personality traits with as few as five questionnaire items. Google Scholar reports that it has been cited nearly 7000 times.

Fast and simple wins the race?

It has seemed so in the past. If today's field continues to 'turn left', the present volume might not garner the attention it deserves. As you will see throughout this book, Yolles and Fink aim for 'complex but right'.

But maybe today's field – today, right now, start of the century's third decade – is different than times past. I hesitate to say so. Scholars commonly perceive that their chosen discipline, right at the time at which they happen to be assessing it, is experiencing a grand 'renaissance' of one sort of another. These perceptions often seem hallucinatory in historical retrospect. Yet I'll risk it and say that things look different today. Here is a personal reflection. Roughly a quarter-century ago, when considering how social-cognitive approaches could address the coherence of personality, it struck me that a valuable conceptual tool could be found in complexity science. Viewing personality as a complex system enabled a 'bottom-up' explanatory strategy (as the term had been used by the philosopher Salmon) in which personality coherence is understood as an emergent property of underlying systems of psychological mechanisms. This, in turn, circumvented a search for 'ghost in the machine' mental structures that correspond isomorphically to observed consistencies in overt behaviour. A similar systems viewpoint had just been advanced by Mischel and Shoda and was implicit in earlier social-cognitive formulations of both Mischel and Bandura. Yet it hardly became 'the zeitgeist' of 1990s personality psychology. The field instead enthused over a factor-analytic trait model in which trait's (1) development (they were said to be inherited, with no environmental influence) and (2) functioning (they were said to influence sociocultural experience but *not* to be influenced reciprocally by such experience) had few, if any, of the properties of a complex system. Those were the days. But look now: systems perspectives in personality psychology abound today. Investigators studying both socioculturally acquired cognition and neurobiologically grounded temperament adopt systems frameworks in which psychological systems interact with one another and with the environments in which people function. Within just the past year, the field has seen handbooks and journal special issues devoted to the complex dynamics of personality and the ways in which these dynamics contribute to personality coherence. Multiple investigators even adopt the 'bottom-up' language of scientific explanation. A recent conversation with a colleague went something like this: 'People are agreeing! What do we do now?'

One compelling answer to that last question is provided by Yolles and Fink. Actually, they provide a whole series of answers to the 'what now?' question. Their conception of persons, cultures and the intelligences

through which people adapt to changing contexts goes far beyond the typical intellectual boundaries of personality psychology. In so doing, Yolles and Fink remind us not only of the range of intellectual resources one can deploy to understand persons but also of the range of tasks that a personality theory can be expected to perform. I will mention just a few of their distinct advances.

Living Systems. Although theories of human nature are broad intellectual constructions, they often rest on something even broader: scientific and metaphysical conceptions of the world at large. This has been true since antiquity. Plato's view of human nature reflected his theory of Forms. Aristotle's incorporated his partly teleological conception of causality. In the contemporary era, energy physics and evolutionary biology informed Freud's psychoanalysis. Examples could go on and on.

Yolles and Fink succinctly state a conception that informs their personality theory in a paper of theirs from 2014 (one of many pieces of scholarship that culminate in the present volume). 'That personality can be represented as a system is not new', they explain, 'but representing it as a living system is'. Once Yolles and Fink say this, one immediately thinks 'yes, of course!' (Well, at least I thought this.) A living systems framework immediately orients one to a holistic conception of the organism rather than to an alternative that suggests looking for bits of biology that might relate to isolated traits. Although living systems thinking is found in some prior writing in personality (e.g., the work of Donald Ford and Richard Lerner), it remains surprisingly under-represented despite being such a natural foundation for the analysis of personality systems. This makes Yolles and Fink's new contribution to the field all the more significant.

Cybernetics. It is nearly 60 years since Herbert Simon's 'The Architecture of Complexity' explained how the conceptual framework of cybernetics could be extended to address, as Simon put it, 'a rather alarming array of topics'. He explained that diverse complex systems – physico-chemical, biological, psychosocial – share basic properties. These include, in particular, an architecture featuring a hierarchical arrangement of components. Such cybernetic thinking is fundamental to the personality theory presented in this book. Yolles and Fink explain that their core theoretical conception, Mindset Agency Theory, is a cybernetic system. A great virtue of this approach is that linkages among components of the cybernetic system enable Yolles and Fink to directly, 'organically', address questions of personality coherence that have become central to the contemporary field.

Agency. You may have noticed the word 'agency' in 'Mindset Agency Theory'. And you might not have expected it, since cybernetic models can be applied to systems that do not exhibit 'agency' in the sense in which humans have an agentic capacity. But Yolles and Fink are providing a cybernetic theory of *living* systems, which direct their actions towards ends. The authors are keenly aware of the need to capture the agentic capacities of people.

It is here (see especially Chapter 4) that Yolles and Fink capitalise on the Social Cognitive Theory of Bandura, especially his treatment of perceived self-efficacy. In so doing, they have hit upon the singularly central feature of Bandura's approach. Social Cognitive Theory is fundamentally a theory of human agency. It was formulated in opposition to alternative theoretical frameworks (e.g., behaviourism, psychoanalysis) that, in Bandura's view, underplay the human capacities for self-reflection and forethought and thereby underestimate people's ability to agentically shape the course of their development.

Yolles and Fink's treatment is not identical to Bandura's, as they explain. The variations in part are substantive and in part may stem from the respective writers assigning subtly different meanings to the same terms. (In particular, when Bandura critiques 'trait' conceptions of personality, as in a chapter in a volume edited by Yuichi Shoda and me, he uses the word 'trait' to refer to constructs that describe behavioural tendencies. Bandura objects to granting dual functions, both descriptive and causal, to the same 'trait' construct. Essentially identical critiques have been made by the philosopher Rom Harré and by the Australian psychologist Simon Boag. As you will see, the 'formative traits' in this work by Yolles and Fink are based on enduring values and coalesce into schematic cognitive structures as individuals interact with their environments and thus are not identical to the trait constructs Bandura critiques.) Despite such variations, Mindset Agency Theory fundamentally shares with social-cognitive theories the goal of understanding the psychological systems and person-situation interactions that give rise to the capacity for personal agency. In addition to the material in Chapter 4, readers will find particularly informative discussions of interactions among personality and cultural systems in Chapter 7 of this volume.

Case Studies. I will note two other aspects of the book. The latter is of greater significance, but the former 'sets it up'.

You will not have guessed it from anything I have said thus far, but Yolles and Fink provide us with case studies. Chapter 11 contains a case study of Donald Trump. Coding of qualitative data reveals, in Trump, identity

themes involving hierarchy, conventionalism, and an ethics of domination of the weak.

Chapter 12 presents a second case study, of Theresa May. A similar analytic strategy yields a different portrait. Specifically, the personal and the public identities of May vary; she is found to exhibit somewhat divergent Mindset types.

In presenting these case studies, Yolles and Fink remind us of one potential product to be delivered by a personality theory: principled, theoretically driven case studies. In the early days of personality psychology, case studies were common. Today, their rarity does not result merely from choice; instead, investigators rarely have the option to conduct a case study. Personality psychology has so thoroughly centred its attention on variables rather than persons that most investigators lack the conceptual or methodological tools needed to conduct a case study formally. Once again, Yolles and Fink's contribution is thus a major step forward.

At this point you may be asking yourself the following question: How were they able to conduct these case studies? What was the 'principled, theoretically driven' system of psychological characteristics within which the personalities of Trump and May were characterised? This question brings us to the most distinctive feature of Yolles and Fink's contribution to personality theory: their conception of 'mindset types'.

Maruyama Mindscapes and Mindsets. Yolles and Fink capitalise upon the ideas of the late Japanese scholar Magoroh Maruyama. Maruyama explained that conceptual schemas can be organised according to different 'logics'. An Aristotelian logic in which objects are classified into fixed taxonomies based on their purported essential properties, for example, is not the only way of conceptualising the world.

The idea that conceptual schemas can vary from one part of the globe to another is likely familiar to readers from findings in cultural psychology. Nisbett, Peng and colleagues document cultural variations in the tendencies to think holistically or analytically, and Kitayama and Markus document cultural variations in conceptions of self-concept, human action and the ways in which persons are independent of, or interdependent with, their social surround. But Maruyama takes two additional steps with which you might not be familiar. One is to emphasise that conceptual schemas vary not only between cultures but also between people within cultures; within any given social or cultural setting, one will find different 'epistemological types'. The other is an empirical claim, namely that although there may be an indefinitely large number of different logics, four are found relatively frequently. These are his four primary 'Mindscape types'.

Yolles and Fink pick up this ball and run with it. They extend Maruyama's ideas, developing them into their Mindset Agency Theory. One extension is to identify individual differences that are 'formative' with respect to conceptual schemes; that is, those individual differences orient people to one versus another form of cognition. Another is to expand the Maruyama typology into a set of eight Mindset types (see, e.g., Table 7.2 or Figure 7.3 of this volume). This gives Yolles and Fink a taxonomic schema that is more differentiated than Maruyama's, yet whose relatively simple structure makes it useful in practice, as the case studies show.

But the broader point is not merely that one can conduct case studies. Yolles and Fink pull off one of the 'great tricks' of personality psychology. They centre their analysis on complex systems of psychological mechanisms, yet produce a relatively straightforward, structured scheme for conceptualising differences among individuals. If this were easy, it would not be so unique.

I will close with a few words of 'warning' to the reader. You occasionally will run across technical terms whose meaning differs from the meaning assigned to those same terms by other writers. Like 'trait', 'mindset' has more than one meaning in the scientific literature. More generally, prepare to be challenged. Unless you are as widely read in cybernetics, epistemology, Social Cognitive Theory, living systems biology, Piagetian theory and Maruyama Universes as the authors – and, with all due respect, you probably aren't – their volume will not be an easy read. Major contributions to scientific fields require effort from the reader. This one is no exception. For the good of personality science, one can only hope that readers 'turn right'. It beats walking off a cliff.

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