



Global traits are not vacuous: A comment on Hogan and Foster

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While most of Hogan and Foster's analysis is sound, I disagree with the claim that trait concepts are completely circular. This is true only for narrowly define, tightly contextualized traits. Global traits have broad and possibly incorrect implications, which proves they are not circular, and the study of their development, processes and predictive utility is a worthy project for personality psychology.

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I agree with about 97 % of Hogan and Foster's analysis, but the place where I must part company is in their insistent claim that trait concepts are circular: "The intellectual agenda of trait theory is to assess traits, which are then used to explain behavior. This suggests trait theory is completely vacuous" (Hogan & Foster, 2017, p. 38).

As I argued in a paper some years ago (Funder 1991), this claim is correct only for narrowly defined or tightly contextualized traits. Theorists ranging from Walter Mischel to Dan McAdams have argued that commonly used trait terms are too broad because behavior depends on context; a person who is extraverted with a family member, for example, might be inhibited with a stranger. So, they argue, it would be better to contextualize the person's description as "extraverted with family members," "inhibited with strangers," and so forth. This approach has seemed attractive to many readers, and I can see how it might work for some predictive purposes, but it also falls into exactly the trap that Hogan and Foster describe. The more tightly contextualized a trait construct is, the more circular its application. If being inhibited with strangers is to be explained by the trait of being inhibited with strangers, we are obviously not getting anywhere.

Which is why I would still continue to argue for the conceptual and empirical utility of "global traits." By this I do not mean just the Big Five (though I would include the Big Five), but individual difference constructs that describe patterns of behavior that go beyond a single action in a single context. Extraversion implies high energy level, positive affect, sociability, and a certain degree of confidence. This implication might be wrong, but it's not circular. In fact, it's not circular precisely *because* it might be wrong. In a similar vein, it has been suggested that conscientious students not only show up to class on time but also are more likely to make their beds (see Gosling, Ko, Man-

narelli, & Morris, 2002). This again might be wrong, but the hypothesis is not circular.

The intellectual agenda of trait psychology, in my view, is to discover and explain non-circular implications such as these. As Brent Roberts has argued, if one could increase the trait of conscientiousness in a person, then one might simultaneously affect beneficial behaviors for the person's health, work life, and relationships, not to mention the tidiness of his or her bedroom (Roberts, Luo, Briley, Chow, Su, & Hill, in press). A related part of the agenda is to explore the origins of traits, which is a topic that Hogan and Foster's dismissive attitude completely bypasses. If someone is confident, or shy, or conscientious, why is that? What combination of genes and experience led him or her to be this way? The whole question of how personality originates and develops seems to fall off the radar as soon as one dismisses traits as vacuous constructs.

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