



Thinking about personality: Comment on Hogan and Foster (2016)

Sergei Shchebetenko

Perm State University

Hogan and Foster's socioanalytic theory has many strengths, in particular in its function as an umbrella approach that takes into account traits, reputations, and other social aspects of personality. Hogan and Foster criticize (self-reported) traits as being elusive neuro-psychic entities, irrelevant for the understanding everyday social life; trait theory underestimates the importance of reputation. However, reputations and agendas, the central elements of socioanalytic theory, are also kinds of neuro-psychic entities, and reputation appears to be an even more ambiguous phenomenon than a self-reported trait. Moreover, from a measurement perspective, traits are not neuro-psychic entities, nor are they action-psychic entities, but rather interpretations and opinions activated when participants fill out questionnaires. Despite the criticism provided by the socioanalytic theory, self-reported traits remain viable for the prediction of behavioural and life outcomes. In addition, self-reported traits can be diverse in nature and include, along with the abstract traits, meta-traits, evaluations of traits, and other structures which make incremental— as compared to traits themselves—contributions to life outcomes.

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Hogan and Foster's (2016) "Rethinking personality" addresses a series of ideas developed over a period of 35 years within the framework of the socioanalytic theory (e.g., Hogan, 1982; Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985). The theory plays an important role in bridging the gap between independent contemporary approaches. Hogan and Foster severely criticize those approaches. Although some criticism addresses the clinical approach, referred to as "European depth psychology", the key object of the authors' attention is trait theory.

The criticism on the clinical approach was basically determined by what Hogan and Foster see as a superfluous emphasis on psychopathology, particularly on neuroses. Yet, socioanalytic theory does not hold essential objections against depth psychology. Moreover, in many respects socioanalytic theory makes use of this approach. In particular, the emphasis on motivation as well as the idea of unconscious behaviour management (for instance, in the context of shyness and loneliness) dominate the socioanalytic theory and have been outlined in detail in the early publications (e.g., Hogan et al., 1985).

The critique on the trait approach in socioanalytic theory, on the other hand, is comprehensive. For example, Hogan and Foster (2016) claim that "Trait theory has taken personality psychology down an unproductive road" (p. 41), and it "...is wrong at every level" (ibid., p. 40). The reasons for that claim are both theoretical and methodological. Theoretically, trait theories have been developed, as Hogan and Foster put it, in an "ivory tower": trait theorists do not take into account the evolutionary context in which homo sapiens evolved, and they do not take into account

the role interpersonal relations play in human nature. Methodologically, the main critique on trait theory is based on the latter's reliance on self-report as an empirical source of personality. Socioanalytic theory opposes identity to reputation. Logically, identity should be included in self-reports, which form the methodological basis of trait theory starting from Gordon Allport (1937). However in reality, according to Hogan and Foster, "we cannot assess identity in a reliable manner" (ibid., p. 39) because "at the level of identity, it is hard to separate truth from fiction because people invent their biographies and life stories" (ibid., p. 39). What trait theory calls self-report, is a self-presentation according to socioanalytic theory. Self-presentation is, after all, a core construct of the latter (Hogan et al., 1985). Hogan and Foster's criticism thus refers to the fact that traits are seen as a sort of objective phenomena independent from the person's interpretations of them. Traits are therein treated by Hogan and Foster as neuro-psychic, mythical entities whose nature is contradictory and whose existence is without sensible proof. The contradictions of trait theory can be eliminated, according to socioanalytic theory, only when individual differences are translated into the context of social interactions. Social interactions form a crucial mechanism of human evolution. Humans are "social animals" (Aronson, 1972/2011), and social consensus makes the measurement of their nature objective and correct. What use is there for me to think I am kind and smart when my friends and acquaintances disagree with it? Such social consensus expresses itself in one's reputation, and reputation is thus opposed to identity. Reputation is thereby more important and "objective" than identity.

But for all that, the methodology of studying reputation does not differ fundamentally from the methodology of studying traits. What is different is the carrier of initial in-

formation: an observer instead of a self-reporter. “It is easy to study reputation by passing out checklists, asking people to describe each other, and then factor analyzing the descriptions” (Hogan & Foster, 2016, p. 39). Moreover, according to Hogan and Foster, the taxonomy of reputations is deemed to be the same as the structure of traits, as in the five-factor model. Therefore, reputations are concordant with traits structurally, although different in their sources. In other words, traits may be relevant but only as other peoples’ opinions of a person. Traits (and apparently reputations) are passive and stating. They have no motion, no motive. On the contrary, peoples’ behaviour is driven by intentions, goals, and motives. This is why in the self-report paradigm one should not study traits but agendas instead.

Another weak part of trait theory, according to Hogan and Foster (2016), is metaphysics of trait assessment. Trait theory, as many other approaches in psychology, engenders abstract (neuro-psycho) entities, losing sight of the initial purpose of their creation. The fact is that these entities have been developed to predict outcomes of human life. Trait theories egocentrically concentrate on traits thus forgetting about outcomes, the authors argue. That is why the supporters of trait theory (just like the researchers of intelligence, for example) are seeking true scores, forgetting that the only possible criterion of truth is the utility of the score¹.

Hogan and Foster conclude their article with a transition from a sharp critique on trait theory to a justification of personality assessment in itself. In particular, they demonstrate that assessment of personality is as good—in fact sometimes even better—as various medical interventions (“...personality is stronger than Viagra”; Hogan & Foster, 2016, p. 41). Hogan and Foster further stress the groundlessness—and even inadequacy—of faking in regard to assessment of personality: to really fake one must stop being oneself. But this seems to be utterly impossible from a socioanalytic perspective. Who can we be other than ourselves, the authors wonder. Since the true self is an irrelevant characteristic of personality as well, faking cannot be defined as a deviation from a true self.

Socioanalytic theory has many attractive features. It builds bridges between different conventional approaches. In this regard, socioanalytic theory precedes and corresponds to the newest tendencies in trait theory which embrace interactions between people in a more dynamic perspective (e.g., Möttus & Allerhand, in press). Classical trait theories point to social interactions quite schematically², emphasizing structural stability and biological origin of traits instead. Obviously, the convergence with the ideas initially pertinent to symbolic interactionism and evolutionary theory provides a viable source for further development for trait theory. The clarity of texts and thoughts is a key advantage of the present as well as of other works by Hogan and his colleagues. Such clarity, along with the somewhat provocative nature of their statements, inevitably stimulates a discussion in readers.

The problem of traits, the authors stress, is that “for trait theory important events mainly happen inside peoples’ heads” (Hogan & Foster, 2016, p. 38). As mentioned above, traits are treated by Hogan and Foster as neuro-psycho entities, a mixture of mental conditions and underlying neural processes. There is every right to treat traits this way: you can easily find such definitions of traits in the landmark theories of the field (e.g., Eysenck, 1950; McCrae & Costa, 1996). The core intention underlying personality and temperament is to establish the relationship between mind and brain. However, as long as we interpret traits as neuro-psycho entities, there are no solid grounds for believing that reputations and agendas are not neuro-psycho entities as well. In the long run they exist in peoples’ heads just as traits do. How then, if what happens in self-reported heads is unknown and irrelevant for us; can we know what happens in the heads of observers? In a sense, reputation appears to be an even more ambiguous phenomenon than a self-reported trait. The authors note that “it is easy to study reputation by passing out checklists, asking people to describe each other” (Hogan & Foster, p. 39). In this case, however, reputation is determined by at least two factors. First, it is the self-presentation of the carrier of that reputation: one strives to manage one’s reputation by means of agendas, social skills, and an even difficult to catch identity. Second, reputation is a product of self-presentation of the people who judge, namely the observers. For observers, reputation judgments of someone are also a source of losses and gains. We admire, envy, support, identify with a person’s achievements – all these conditions affect our judgements of her or his reputation. One and the same person can be praised and blamed by different people, depending on the nature of their self-presentations or agendas. Paraphrasing Hogan and Foster, it is important to know how much you lie to yourself about how much you lie about the other.

Regarding the neuro-psycho entity issue: I admit that there is an internal contradiction which, truth be told, is inherent not only to trait theory but rather to our understanding of mind on the whole. This problem persists throughout the history of psychology. However, let us try to be as consistent as Hogan and Foster (2016) and look at traits from the measurement perspective: what are the real indicators of traits? On a close inspection it becomes apparent that the neural component of the concept of trait is only an assumption which is neither tested nor approved directly but rather presumed implicitly. The *neuro* element appears as a postulate of neural bases of mind (for example, as a postulate of the complete biological determination of traits in the five-factor theory by McCrae & Costa, 1996). The project of personality neuroscience (DeYoung, 2010; Yarkoni, 2015) has appeared not by coincidence. The findings obtained in this project, by the way, are not coherent: they are a mixed bag of weak and at times moderate correlations between traits and parameters of brain activity. Similar patterns can be found in the genetics of personality (South, Reichborn-Kjennerud, Eaton, & Krueger, 2015). One can also consider the configuration of traits and overt behaviour. The postulate of this unity (the trait as an action-psycho entity?) is as speculative as the postulate of the unity of the mind and brain in personality traits. Although behavioural patterns are real (Hogan & Foster,

¹ In this respect, Galang (2017) refers to the problem of a “true score” of reputation as it presents itself in the socioanalytic theory.

² This is so, of course, only if one does not take into account the linguistic origin of traits underlying the lexical approach (Cattell, 1943; Goldberg, 1981), which inherently corresponds to the interpersonal approach.

2016, p. 38), personality traits are not behavioural patterns. As Hogan and Foster (2016) rightfully point out, even in regard to reputations and outcomes a cornucopia of results—still of correlations—has been obtained. Therefore, personality traits are neither neuro- nor action-psychic entities, but rather psychic, or maybe lingual-psychic entities. Traits, as represented in a questionnaire (be it self-report or other-report), are judgments about behaviour³. As DeYoung (2017, p. 14) points out, personality psychology “can do better... following the cognitive revolution”. I agree with it, and, in so doing, it makes sense to consider traits as memory-based judgmental structures (cf. Schultheiss, 2007). First of all, these structures are most likely a product of the semantic memory of a person, and this is the point that Hogan and Foster also underscore. At the same time, in a number of cases the response to the questionnaire item may be as it is, when the item is obscure or provocative (recall “I have never passed gas” in Hogan & Foster, 2016 – the response of the respondent may be an outcome of the item itself rather than of her or his semantic memory). In certain cases, when the item represents a concrete question (“How many cups of coffee did you drink yesterday?” or “Did you rejoice in someone’s success last week?”), traits may be a product of episodic memory as well. In fact, from the perspective of trait measurement, a trait is a reflection, or as Hogan and Foster call it, an introspection of behaviour. Therefore, traits are not neuro-psychic entities but interpretations and opinions activated during the fulfilment of a questionnaire (cf., for example, the comments of DeYoung (2017) and Funder (2017) for the conventional view on the questionnaire-measured traits as patterns of behaviour).

According to the socioanalytic theory, traits look like ethereal ideas taking us away to Platonic metaphysics. Such intangible traits are opposed to vigorous and pragmatic agendas. Obviously, both agendas and the problem of motivation as a whole, remain on the periphery of trait theories. However, while the person has agendas and motives, he or she can also think about his or her personality. Despite all the criticism provided by Hogan and Foster (2016), trait theories remain quite viable for the prediction of behaviour and life outcome perspectives. Personality is stronger than Viagra even when it is measured with self-reports. Self-reported conscientiousness, for instance, regularly correlates with academic achievement (Poropat, 2009; Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012) and with health outcomes (Kern & Friedman, 2008), whereas self-reported extraversion is a reliable correlate of online social networking behaviour (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011; Shen, Brdiczka, & Liu, 2015)⁴.

The authors believe that trait terms ought to be used to observe and code the behaviour of others, not one’s own behaviour. Let us assume that introspection (or rumination) is a symptom of neurosis, which is pertinent to a vast minority of peoples’ population, as Hogan and Foster (2016, p.39) suggest. But is it really unimportant to code one’s own behaviour in terms of traits, from the perspective of planning or self-management? Is reflection (introspection)

not needed in these cases, and don’t we use language for that? Trapnell and Campbell (1999) have demonstrated that neurotic rumination and intellectual reflection may act as two modes of self-consciousness. These two modes correlated with either neuroticism or openness to experience. This means that trait terms are used to encode presentations of a person, not only by external observers: we ourselves do the same from the self-observation perspective. And, at the same time, such self-reported traits are linked to behavioural and life outcomes.

According to Hogan and Foster, the main problem of traits lies in the method of their measurement, which is based on self-reports. As Hogan and Foster (2016) stress, traits are based on self-presentations rather than on self-reports. Self-presentations are what people do when they answer questionnaires leading us thereby astray from their actual behaviour⁵. However, there is introspection, which also affects self-reported traits. Although a person manages self-image, she or he still reflects on her or his behaviour as it is. And this reflection can take different forms. In particular, people do not only have ideas on the consistency of their behaviour—that is: on their traits; they also have meta-perceptual images of their traits (Carlson & Oltmanns, 2015; Carlson, Vazire, & Furr, 2011) and even evaluations of traits (Bäckström & Björklund, 2016). However, in line with the authors’ reasoning, traits as a product of introspection are not only ineffective but also irrelevant: “individual actors do not have traits, they have agendas” (Hogan & Foster, 2016, p. 40). The social world consists not only of Donald Trump or Margaret Thatcher who have been exemplified by Hogan and Foster as models of the agenda-driven persons, the worldly players of the game of life who avoid introspection and reflection. There are many successful people who are in fact inclined to introspection and reflection, and these are not only clinical cases (it is the agenda-driven people, in fact, who often look somewhat peculiar). Introspection and reflection, comprehension of oneself, can be quite adaptive and at times accompany social success as well.

While studying agendas and reputations we strike against the same problem of self-presentation even if we do not deal with a self-report but with observations of people by other people. I do agree that trait theory underestimates the role of reputation. Normally, observer ratings are considered a supplementary means for validation of self-reports (e.g., Paunonen & Hong, 2015). However, reputation has its self-consistent meaning in personality, independent of the notion of identity cherished by trait theorists. There are traits that manifest differently for the self as opposed to other people (Vazire, 2010)⁶. Some sort of umbrella approach is needed that would take into account traits as a product of identity and reputations as a product of observer-ratings. Socioanalytic theory provides relevant grounds for this important discussion.

³Note, however, that traits are not judgements about the brain.

⁴ See also a succinct but yet extensive overview by Jeronimus and Riese (2017) on the role of neuroticism.

⁵ The authors claim self-reported traits are inadequate because they are limited to self-presentations based on semantic memories and identity claims. At the same time they also label the idea of true self as irrelevant. True self may be a nonsense from the socioanalytic view, but truth can be understood here as the degree of consistency between a trait (self-presentation/identity claim) and relevant behaviour.

⁶ Although in most cases self- and other-reports remarkably correspond between each other (Galang, 2017).

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