A THEORY OF
PERSONALITY
DEVELOPMENT

LUCIANO L'ABATE

With the assistance of Charles H. Bryson

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To the memory of

Uriel Foà

Fellow expatriate, world citizen

Series Preface

This series of books is addressed to behavioral scientists interested in the nature of human personality. Its scope should prove pertinent to personality theorists and researchers as well as to clinicians concerned with applying an understanding of personality processes to the amelioration of emotional difficulties in living. To this end, the series provides a scholarly integration of theoretical formulations, empirical data, and practical recommendations.

Six major aspects of studying and learning about human personality can be designated: personality theory, personality structure and dynamics, personality development, personality assessment, personality change, and personality adjustment. In exploring these aspects of personality, the books in the series discuss a number of distinct but related subject areas: the nature and implications of various theories of personality; personality characteristics that account for consistencies and variations in human behavior; the emergence of personality processes in children and adolescents; the use of interviewing and testing procedures to evaluate individual differences in personality; efforts to modify personality styles through psychotherapy, counseling, behavior therapy, and other methods of influence; and patterns of abnormal personality functioning that impair individual competence.

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Preface

To write a book about a theory of personality development in this day and age takes considerable gall and a great deal of ambition, if not grandiosity. The field of personality theory has not progressed as much as it could because most authors, especially researchers, seem to shy away from "grand" theorizing and what they perceive as a too-demanding (actually impossible) task. Furthermore, most psychologists with empirical interests are trained, hired, and rewarded for their analytical rather than their global skills. Theorizing becomes a dangerous territory when your colleagues may snipe at you for being too theoretical and not supporting your ideas with evidence. Theory building and testing may become an even more solitary pursuit within the family psychology paradigm, about which most academic psychologists are ignorant or disinterested. Personality, for all practical purposes, is still viewed as developing in a vacuum, away from relationships and especially (God forbid!) from intimate relationships. Until recently, most psychologists have shied away from this area. Fortunately, love and intimacy are no longer strange or weird concepts. They are becoming more and more a legitimate field of study.

Social psychological concepts have been my avocation as a practicing clinician since I became involved in family psychology. I will readily admit to being a rank amateur as a social psychologist. I have not been specifically trained in this field, nor have I performed any specific research in it. I have been interested, however, in seeing how developmental and social psychological concepts can be applied to a description and understanding of personality development as a relational, interpersonal process, especially in intimate relationships, such as the family.

In this book, I have attempted to integrate what I have experienced and seen as a practicing family clinical psychologist and as an academician with more than 30 years of clinical practice, teaching, and research. Can there be isomorphism between the problems we see in our offices and what we can test out in the laboratory? I do believe that it is possible to conceptualize personality development in ways that are isomorphic in

both settings. Furthermore, how can we separate issues of normative personality development from issues of deviant and psychopathological development? I do not think we can. On practically every page, I try to show how normative and deviant personality developments are extensions and amplifications of each other.

In Part One (Chapters 1 through 3), I define and expand upon each term: theory, personality, and development. Part Two (Chapters 4 and 5), focuses on the two assumptions of the theory (space and time). In Part Three, the substance of the theory is considered in Being (Chapter 6), Doing (Chapter 7), and Having (Chapter 8). Part Four examines the settings where personality development takes place—home (Chapter 9), work (Chapter 10), and leisure (Chapter 11)—together with priorities (Chapter 12), a concept that would relate to the two previous parts and all the preceding chapters. Part Five considers the assessment and verification of the theory through evaluation (Chapter 13) and interventions (Chapter 14). Finally, Part Six (Chapter 1) looks at the validity of the theory and its expansion to include sexuality and addictions.

This book is, primarily, an outline of a theory of personality development. A full-fledged theory of personality development would take much more room than can be allotted to any author by any publisher. Hence, I slighted many topics that deserved much fuller treatment than they received here, particularly in Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11. On the other hand, so much has been written about the topics covered in these chapters that the major function of the theory consists of relating them together. Thus, it is possible to criticize this book on grounds of being superficial, on one hand, as well as of trying to cover too much ground, on the other. I spent a large amount of space on topics that had not been adequately covered in the literature. An author has to decide from the very outset of writing a book whether to stress intensity or extensity. In this case, my choice was to favor extensity in the chapters that received short shift, mentioned earlier, and intensity for the remaining chapters, which received relatively more space. I take responsibility for the present outcome.

As a student of personality for 64 years, I hope that this book will be useful to other students who are interested in the same exciting topic. They may range in age from undergraduates to their teachers and to the teachers of teachers of courses on personality theory. A book dedicated to personality development and psychopathology naturally will be of interest to most therapists, who need to make sense of their clients' behaviors as persons, as partners, and as parents.

Charles H. Bryson, a former student, assisted in the typing of this book. Because he is familiar with my thinking, he was able to clarify my grammar and syntax. He is not responsible for the substantive aspects of the theory.

I am grateful to Professor Stanley Krippner, of the Saybrook Institute, for thoroughly reviewing the manuscript and pointing out various conceptual errors. If any mistakes remain in this manuscript, I am solely responsible for them.

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Contents

Definition of Terms

CHAPTER 1

What Is a Theory?

The individual remains the principal unit of analysis for most social science research.
(WHITE, 1991, p. 118)

Individuals are the fundamental units of society.
(GERGEN, 1991, p. 156)

This chapter delineates some of the epistemological hurdles that a theory must face to go forward and progress beyond current thinking about personality development. Among the many possible issues, the following ones need elaboration: (a) distinction between a paradigm, a theory, and a model, with the definition of an appropriate theory for *a relational and contextual theory of personality development* (personality does not develop in a vacuum—as suggested by most traditional textbooks on personality—personality develops in relationship to intimate others in specific settings, especially the home); (b) points of emphasis in the theory that would justify its use and applications; (c) criteria to evaluate the theory, some of these criteria being more rigid than others; and (d) relationships between theory (or epistemology) and practice or applications. These points of emphasis should attempt to answer the question: "What is the good of a theory if it cannot be verified in the laboratory as well as in the clinic?" Although many solutions could be proposed for each of these issues, additional topics deemed just as important by other investigators would warrant different answers from the ones proposed here.

DEFINITIONS OF A THEORY

Before defining a theory, we need to distinguish between a paradigm, a theory, and a model. Although the three often have been confused and equated with one another, a theory is different from a paradigm or a model. Such an equation is epistemologically inaccurate, unnecessary, and unwarranted. A paradigm encompasses a view of reality that supersedes and is superordinate to a theory. Dewey and Bentley (1949) summarized the evolution of our views of reality according to three major

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paradigms: (a) *actional*—behavior without any connection to any other behavior and without any rational connection or explanation or, as by magic; (b) *reactional*—behavior in response to other behavior; and (c) *transactional*—behavior in a bidirectional exchange between two individuals that is observed by another individual looking over the interaction. Interactions between and among human beings are not seen as being separate from the observers who, by the very act of observing, become part of the whole transaction.

When we apply this transactional view to personality development, we readily can see it as the outcome of interactions that we have observed among family members, making it, therefore, an ecological transaction. We, the observers, are looking at it with our own biases, and in doing so, we may wittingly or unwittingly influence it. Personality development and family behavior are interconnected; they are not isolated or independent from the behavior of other family members. In a family, everybody matters. Each person influences and is influenced by everybody else in the family—positively or negatively. Thus, by omission or by commission, we have bi- and multidirectional effects taking us away from the traditional monadic psychology and traditional personality theories, which view personality development in a vacuum, or as action or reaction (Pervin, 1990; Spiegel, 1971). Thus, the encompassing paradigm that is superordinate to the present theory is *contextual* because the family is the most influential and relevant setting for the origin and development of personality. Among other influential settings, work and leisure are the most important ones, depending on individual proclivities and priorities.

A transactional ecological paradigm, supposedly a new way of thinking about the interconnectedness of individual and family behavior, has been confused as being a theory, mixing levels of abstraction. A paradigm describes how behavior takes place in general and abstract terms. It could be called a metaphor or a metatheory, as represented by systems thinking, for instance, but it is not a theory. Systems thinking, unfortunately, took this paradigm wholesale and tried, unsuccessfully, to make it into what it is not, a theory (L'Abate & Colondier, 1987). A theory is a more specific and concrete view of behavior. A paradigm, because of its abstract and general nature, is untestable, whereas a theory is testable. Even though we can see the interconnectedness of family members as individuals, we need to have more information and make many more assumptions about behavior than a paradigm permits.

Hence, the overarching paradigm that forms the background to the present theory is contextual-relational: Personality development takes place in various contexts according to a normative/hierarchical arrangement—family first, then work, then leisure, transit, and transitory settings (Part Four). A theory makes some informed guesses on how each setting affects personality development. A theory, therefore, is a set of interconnected statements or propositions linked by a communality of

purpose or topic ultimately leading to empirical verification. The purpose of the present theory is to understand personality and its development in various contexts or settings.

Personality development is interconnected with the development of other personalities, but how? A paradigm is insufficient to help us understand personality development except in general and vague terms of interconnectedness or interdependence. A paradigm accepts this interconnectedness as a given, but it is up to the theory to explain specifically how this interconnectedness and interdependence take place. A theory can be dialectical—operating within the context of discovery—like many family theories, or demonstrative—operating within the context of demonstrativeness—as in some psychological and sociological theories of behavior in the family (L'Abate, 1986). A theory is an invention for interpreting behavior: (a) *as an umbrella* to cover and encompass certain behaviors, in this case, personality development; (b) *as a map* to show us the territory covered, routes for traversing that territory, and the obstacles and limitations we will encounter in getting there; (c) *as a compass* to point us in the direction we should follow to get where we want to go within the territory covered by the theory; and (d) *as a straitjacket,* narrowing our views and perspectives.

A theory, by definition, is *testable;* a paradigm is not. If a theory representing a particular paradigm is found to be valid, this validity reinforces the significance of the underlying paradigm. For instance, if a theory of personality development, based on the interconnectedness of a family member with other family members, were found to be valid, then it would reinforce the ecological transactional paradigm. Furthermore, a theory becomes testable through models derived from the theory. We bring down the level of abstraction another considerable notch when we go from a theory to models. Both paradigms and theories supposedly explain behavior. Models, however, do not have such an explanatory power, because their function is to test parts of a theory through description. Models are more modest and restricted, usually based on concrete and specific views of behavior that may or may not derive from a theory; therefore, they serve as ways of testing theories, or they may operate by themselves, separate and isolated from any theory. Eventually, even isolated models will need to be reconciled with existing theoretical frameworks. Theories may be formal or informal, reductionistic or nonreductionistic, structured or unstructured.

A theory is an attempt at interpretation and explanation of reality as one sees it. Let us analyze some of the words in this sentence. "Attempt" indicates the tentativeness of a theory: There is nothing sacred or absolute about it. The word in and by itself denotes tentativeness. For "interpretation," we should include the notion of subjectivism versus objectivism, which is discussed later in this chapter. For instance, the theory of personality (Chapter 2) development (Chapter 3) presented here (Figure 1.1)
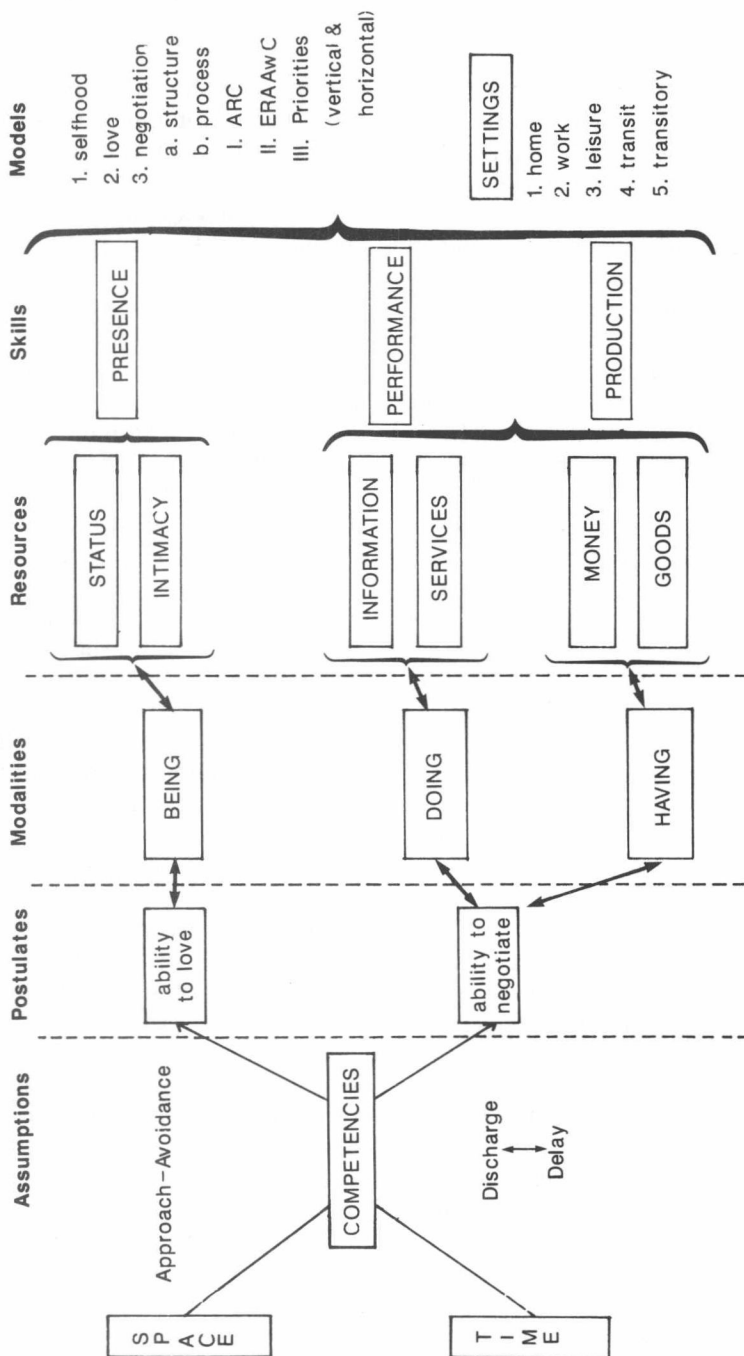
Figure 1.1. A developmental theory of interpersonal competence.

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consists of two assumptions of space and time, postulates, modalities, competencies, skills, models, and settings.

Space modulates attachments based on emotional and interpersonal distance, underlying the dimensions of internal and external distance respectively, as assessed by extremes of approach–avoidance (Chapter 4). Time modulates control along extremes assessed by discharge delay functions (Chapter 5). These assumptions underlie two postulates about the ability to love (Chapter 6) and the ability to negotiate respectively. Both postulates define personalities as interpersonal competence, defined by how one is, does, and has (Chapter 2). The three modalities of Being, Doing, and Having were derived from Foà and Foà's (1974) resource exchange theory. These authors postulated six resource classes that are continuously exchanged (given and received) between and among us: status, love, information, services, money, and goods (L'Abate, 1986). These postulates link modalities to resources exchanged, which are then linked to competencies and then to verifiable models, according to what resource is exchanged, as summarized in Figure 1.1.

The ability to love is linked to the modality of Being (Chapter 6). Being is made by exchange of resources in status and in love and is expressed personally and interpersonally through presence, being emotionally available to self and to significant others. Presence is evaluated (tested, verified) through two models: one is a model of self-definition through the attribution of importance to self and to others, and the second is a model of love and intimacy. Both models have either been verified through paper-and-pencil self-report tests (L'Abate & Wagner, 1985, 1988; Stevens & L'Abate, 1989) or are in the process of being verified.

The ability to negotiate is linked to the modalities of Doing and Having (Chapters 7 and 8). Doing is made up by exchange of resources in services and in information, and is expressed through performance. Doing is measured by *how well* the person performs on various roles and tasks at home, as a provider, partner, and parent; at work, as an employer or employee; and in leisure-time activities, such as hobbies, avocations, games, and sports. Having is made up by exchange of resources in goods and in money and is expressed through production (Foà & Foà, 1974). Having is measured by how much one produces at home, at work, and in leisure-time activities (Part Four). *Importance* as used here refers to the process of attribution whereby a person perceives a resource and/or setting as being necessary for enjoyment and survival in life. *Resource* refers to any of the six variables considered in Part Three. *Settings* are considered in Part Four.

The two assumptions, therefore, lead respectively to two postulates about the ability to love and to negotiate (Part Two), modalities, competencies, and eventually models derived from the modalities (Part Three). Postulates derive from assumptions, whereas models derive