

**Personality Coherence  
and Incoherence**  
A Perspective on Anxiety and Depression



# Personality Coherence and Incoherence

## A Perspective on Anxiety and Depression

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## Foreword

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Personality psychology is the science of describing and explaining individual differences in affect, cognition, and behavior, and specifically with the *patterning* of these differences across situations and over time. This science deals with complex phenomena, entailing person and environmental factors and their interactions. Any theory that attempts to account for these factors must be conceptually sophisticated yet empirically testable, especially in relation to how interacting components make up the higher-level integrated organization that is manifest in personality and associated phenotypes (e.g., anxiety and depression). However, the development of any such a theory is a daunting undertaking and certainly not one for the dispositionally faint hearted. Małgorzata Fajkowska has risen to this challenge with aplomb.

The theory detailed in this book sets out to address four major problems in personality psychology: (a) personality as a complex system; (b) the multiple levels of structure and causal processes (i.e., biological, psychological, and situational mechanisms); (c) stability and change over time; and (d) coherence and incoherence in structures and processes. A central theme running through the theory is the necessity of viewing personality as an organized system with interrelating variables that interact with the external world. Fajkowska adumbrates a System of Regulation and Integration Stimulation as a fundamental personality architecture. Its major function is to attain and maintain (a) the optimal level of activation and arousal to achieve the optimal level of functioning of the whole system and (b) intraindividual coherence and behavioral integrity. These functions are achieved by two sets of processes: an attentional system and temperament traits.

Of special note, the theory attempts to account for these complex, higher-level phenomena through the lens of Systems Theory, which emphasizes the coordinated action of interconnected subsystems. This perspective has been applied—with some success—to many diverse areas, including robotics, biological systems, and even economic systems. Fajkowska provides a novel application of this perspective to one of the major problems in personality psychology: coherence and incoherence. A fresh perspective on this long-standing problem is indicated by the fact that psychologists still struggle with it—and not only with its solution, but also with its definition. Any theory that can throw new light on this problem would be a major contribution. For sure, we shall have to wait for future research to announce the final verdict on the scientific power of the theory outlined in this

book, but no waiting time is needed to recognize the fact that Fajkowska has provided a new way to look at an old problem.

The emphasis of the theory on highly interdependent subsystems, all working together to produce the final psychological output, makes good scientific sense because it is necessary in personality psychology—as in other areas of psychology—to consider the system as whole rather than as merely a collection of isolated subsystems. This emphasis sidesteps the pitfalls of the strictly analytical approach, preferring instead a synthetic approach that views parts of the system as meaningful only in terms of the workings of the whole system. Too often lip service is paid to this dictum, but frequently it is forgotten in the everyday business of research. But systems thinking should be paid more attention, and for several reasons: it forces us to focus on the related superordinate functions of the parts and whole of the system, and it encourages us to consider the longer-term outcomes of the operation of the whole system. This perspective is especially vital since personality is concerned with longer-term stabilities and not just with immediate, short-term outcomes. The fact that personality scores are able to predict outcomes many years ahead underscores the value of any theory that can provide a viable account of these longer-term stabilities and outcomes. Yet at the same time, personality is not “set in stone”; it does change and in meaningful ways. Explaining immediate (state) processes, and how they lead to both stability and instability in longer-term (trait) outcomes, is one of the major strengths of this book.

To illustrate the above points, consider defensive behaviors. Although there are many different kinds of these behaviors, their coherence can only be meaningfully seen in terms of their related superordinate functions. For example, in the case of freezing and flight that are seen in the face of intense and immediate threat, although they are apparently quite different, they serve the same function of avoiding/escaping danger—albeit by different behavioral strategies demanded by immediate environmental demands (freezing when flight is not a viable option, flight when escape is possible). Looking at each of these specific processes outside a systems framework is bound only to lead to confusion—and this is exactly what is seen with the continued confusion in psychology and psychiatry between fear and anxiety: although superficially very similar, they have different superordinate goals (avoidance/escape in the case of fear, cautious approach in the case of anxiety). Thus behaviors can appear different but serve the same functional goal, or they can appear highly similar but serve different functional goals.

There is another reason why a theory that explains coherence in personality structure and processes is so important; this relates to differences between the patterns of within-person and between-persons covariation. Although we might assume that the covariance structures within the person should be reflected in population-level trait structures, this is not the case. Partly, this might be a result of the fact that within-person covariation reflects dynamics in the time domain of repeated measures of a single person, whereas between-person differences relate to

the study of a large group of people who have been measured (usually only once). It is also possible that there are heterogenous subsamples in the population that have different covariance structures, and this confuses the picture at the population (trait) level. But these explanations are unlikely to be the whole story. Although it must logically be the case that the source of personality traits measured at the population level must come from within-person dynamics, we lack a theoretical model of how to relate these two levels. It will be important to see if the theory proposed in this book is able to shed new light upon this important problem.

Fajkowska expands the basic concepts of her model to account for the clinical conditions of anxiety and depression that, even to this day, resist adequate explanation and treatment. Of particular interest here, the author uses the theory to propose different forms of these clinical disorders: the Arousal Type of anxiety, Apprehension Type of anxiety, Anhedonic Type of depression, and Valence Type of depression. She shows that these types are related to specific attentional patterns of stimulation processing. These novel postulates clearly need empirical scrutiny, but their theoretical novelty should orient the attention of investigators to new research questions.

In this detailed and thought-provoking book, Małgorzata Fajkowska provides a unique perspective on personality and its expressions in anxiety and depression. Her theory is well founded, resplendent in factual description and theoretical nuance, and bound to stimulate new thinking and research.

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## Preface

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**W**riting this book I was guided by the belief that the field of personality and individual differences should be formed in the manner of an integrative discipline. Thus when I began working on this volume some years ago, I made an assumption that it is valuable to adapt systems thinking to understanding personality and individual differences—more specifically, that a systems approach potentially might advance the core concerns of this branch of psychology, with a priority on personality coherence and incoherence.

This book is about personality coherence and incoherence and their role in explaining anxiety and depression. The operative words in the previous sentence are “personality coherence and incoherence.” There are only a few works designed to introduce readers to the topic of personality coherence; these books are organized according to the integrative theories that have been of great importance in shaping and defining this field. However, any theoretical discussion of personality coherence in these books includes temperament and the attentional system—within the same framework—as the basic elements of personality coherence. Furthermore, none of these publications explain personality incoherence.

I have tried to propose an alternative. Obviously, the question of what personality coherence and incoherence are was the major motivating factor to write this book. Also, I was puzzled by the question about the functional role of personality coherence and incoherence and how it relates to the quality and dynamics of performance. Thus my primary goal in this volume is to establish the theory of personality coherence/incoherence. In addition, I introduce the affective traits (anxiety and depression) to this theory as elements of intraindividual coherence/incoherence, with the intention of offering a more complete explanation for the functional links between negative affectivity and attentional processing. Thus my secondary goal in this book is to integrate anxiety and depression into a more comprehensive scheme—a personality system—that better captures their complex nature and their relation with cognitive performance.

To some extent this book builds on the foundation provided by my earlier studies, papers, and monograph. However, it represents a more ambitious undertaking. I am uncomfortably aware that my proposition is only a modest attempt to illuminate some phenomena connected with personality and individual differences and mood traits. I would like to leave a critical evaluation of this volume in the hands of readers.

With reference to prospective readers, the book is intended for a range of audiences—including researchers and advanced students in personality and individual

differences psychology, colleagues in other areas of psychology, and professionals in related disciplines.

The preparation of this work benefited enormously from the knowledge of various people who are experts in personality, individual differences, cognition, mood disorders, and statistics. They very kindly lent their assistance by commenting on some of the draft chapters of the book. Among those to whom I am truly grateful for such assistance are Philip Corr, Ewa Domaradzka, Andrzej Elias, Michael Eysenck, Piotr Jałkowski, Joanna Kantor-Martynuska, Shulamith Kreidler, Jan Strelau, Agata Wytykowska, Anna Zagórska, and Marzenna Zakrzewska. I also thank publisher Eliot Werner for his tremendous devotion to the editorial work on this volume, and the late Gloria Brownstein for her editorial assistance.

I also wish to thank the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (grant #N-N106432633) and the Institute of Psychology, Polish Academy of Sciences, for their financial support of this publication.

Writing such a complex book has influenced my personal life. On one hand it was a great intellectual adventure, but on the other it robbed me of time that I could spend with my family and friends. Thus I wish to thank my husband Marek and my daughter Weronika for sharing the enthusiasm and confusion of months of writing. I am also very grateful to Reverend Witold Świąder and Helena Krysiak for their prayers and encouragement. But above all I thank God and my late father for giving me the strength to finish the project.

I dedicate this book to my daughter Weronika, who has the most beautiful personality I have ever seen.

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