

**European Journal of Personality Special Issue 2018:
“From Correlations to Explanations in Personality Research”
- Call for Special Issue Papers -**

“During the past 50 years, personality psychology has made considerable progress concerning personality description, and prediction of and by personality. In contrast, explanation of personality development and personality effects has lagged far behind. In the coming decades, much more inspiration and transpiration is needed to change this unsatisfactory situation.”
(Asendorpf, 2016)

Contribute a paper to the special issue of the European Journal of Personality: “From Correlations to Explanations in Personality Research.”

This EJP special issue takes on no less than one of the most fundamental questions of personality psychology: How can the field move from documenting correlations to providing causal explanations. It is arguably the mandate of personality psychology to *explain* the nature, sources, development, and consequences of individual differences. For any of these, simply documenting correlations won't do.

Naturally, correlations are ambiguous to interpret. For example, when the occurrence of a particular class of life events is related to cross-sectional variance or change in a personality characteristic, it is often hoped, intuitively or based on theoretical grounds, that the life event can *explain* some of the variance in this particular trait. At other times, similar correlations are taken to show the influences of personality characteristics outside the domain of personality (e.g., developing a health condition). Furthermore, a transactional perspective would consider influences running in both directions, whereas yet another take would be to see the correlations as being confounded by third-variables (e.g., shared genetic propensities). These are age-old problems, but they are still making researchers so careful as to often refrain from any causal interpretations altogether. Longitudinal designs can often circumvent such problems, but they, too, have to be appropriate to the question at hand.

The special issue welcomes concrete novel proposals that can advance causal interpretations in the context of current personality research (or make a well-argued case for why causal interpretations are currently not possible altogether). The proposals can range from proposing research designs and specific statistical models to conceptual models. In most cases, the proposals should be accompanied by empirical examples. We expect the proposals to contain **novel ideas** that have not been published yet, whereas the illustrative empirical data can be previously published.

Please send proposals of your planned contribution **no later than December 2, 2016** to René Möttus (rene.mottus@ed.ac.uk) and Christian Kandler (christian.kandler@uni-bielefeld.de). For more details, see next pages of this document.

Contribute your best work to the 2018 EJP special issue “From Correlations to Explanations in Personality Research”!

Best regards,

René Möttus and Christian Kandler

(associate editors)

Benefits for authors

1. Pre-review based on proposals
2. Fast review process of full submissions
3. Increased visibility due to publication in a special issue packed with high-quality papers
4. Publication in one of the most prestigious empirical journals of the field

Time-line

Based on proposals, **potential contributions will be selected by the beginning of 2017**. The special issue “From Correlations to Explanations in Personality Research” is planned to be published in April 2018

2nd December 2016: Initial deadline for proposal

6th January 2017: Initial feedback on the proposals and first invitations

3rd February 2017: Revised proposals (if a revision was requested)

17th February 2017: Final invitations

1st September 2017: First submissions of papers

Proposal details

1. Contributions can focus on the *explanation* of personality itself (e.g., how individual differences arise from processes within individuals or between individuals and environment) or on explaining the development and consequences of personality
2. Contributions can present new conceptual models or more specific hypotheses, research designs or analytical methods
3. Preferably, proposals also include one or more empirical examples that illustrate the utility of the contribution and/or how it can be implemented

Naturally, we do not expect empirical results as yet, but we do expect a good **rationale** and, preferably, an **implementation** that is tailored to the rationale and sufficiently detailed. Ideally, the proposal will describe the **empirical data** to be included.

We expect the proposals to be **1 to 2 pages** in length and to cover these points in sufficient detail.

Some more details that may or may not help your imagination

Because the special issue is targeted at novel ideas, we do not want to restrict authors' imagination by imposing too specific guidelines. But we imagine that some of the following topics might provide an indication as to what is encouraged. It is important to note that the contributions do not have to be on these topics.

1. *Using longitudinal designs to support causal inference*. Longitudinal designs can help with causal interpretability but often only when the measurements are taken at life stages and separated by intervals that are appropriate for the question at hand. For example, some dramatic events could be expected to have immediate but gradually waning effects on personality characteristics (making shorter rather than longer measurement intervals useful), whereas others effects may need longer periods to build up and mostly become manifest at particular periods of life (e.g., some alleged influences of personality on health may require

decades to materialize and rarely become manifest in younger ages when most people enjoy relatively good health regardless of their health-related behaviors). Proposals could consider some of these possibilities and present relevant conceptual, research design-related or analytical tools that can be applied to support causal inferences.

2. *Making greater use of controlled and “natural” experiments or quasi-causal models.* Among other things, contributions could propose common designs for lab experiments, behavioral and pharmacological interventions, or discuss common instances where natural interventions could be used to support causal inferences. Also, contributions might consider twin-difference designs, instrumental variable approaches (e.g., Mendelian Randomization), or propensity score matching.
3. *Combining long-term and short-term variability and individual differences.* Here, short-term variability refers to within-individual differences as often captured in experience sampling or diary studies and long-term variability refers to the kinds of changes often considered in personality development studies. For example, contributions could discuss models whereby long-term changes result from (the accumulation of) short-term changes. Also, contributions could discuss conditions in which patterns of short-term variability should (not) match patterns of individual differences to support causal inferences. For example, when a personality trait is positively correlated with an outcome that can vary over time, should short-term fluctuations in the trait also positively correlate with changes in the outcome (e.g., as a general rule or in particular instances, and perhaps in some cases the associations are expected to run in different directions altogether)?
4. *Considerations of the usefulness of different levels of abstraction within a personality trait system.* The (descriptive) hierarchy of personality traits consists mostly of aggregate constructs of different breadth and flavor. In which conditions can aggregates be causal and in which conditions should the constituents of these aggregates be employed as *explanatory* units? For example, Spearman's theorem of independence of indicator suggests that a construct should be identifiable independently of its indicators. By way of extension, this means that the associations of aggregate personality constructs with their possible causes and consequences should also not depend on particular indicators (items, facets) used for identifying the trait. If so, how could this condition be properly assessed? Should aggregates display emergent properties to have explanatory value over their constituents and how could this be tested? Or should the constituents make up for each other for an aggregate to be causal (such as feeling ill can hamper ability to work regardless of whether the illness reflects a rhinovirus or influenza)?
5. *Models that go beyond investigating linear trends in how variables are associated.* For example, it may be unlikely that one variable (e.g., neuroticism) keeps influencing another variable (e.g., depression) in the same manner over long periods of time as such stationary relationships would eventually result in the values of the target variables (here, depression) increasing or decreasing beyond meaningful boundaries. If so, it may be useful for causal hypotheses to explicitly consider circumstances in which causality plays out in a particular direction and circumstances where the opposite is true or the target variable is not influenced by the allegedly causal variable at all such that it can “correct itself”. We think that such hypotheses and their empirical verifications could greatly enhance the plausibility of causal inferences.
6. *Using genetically/biologically informative designs.* Combining biological, contextual, and personality structures and processes helps to understand how biological differences accompany personality differences and how they interact with individual differences in

environmental circumstances (e.g., genetically/biologically informative or environmentally sensitive studies on person/gene/biology-group/environment/culture interaction and transaction). In this vein, for example, genetically/biologically informative research can help to unravel large heritability estimates for personality characteristics in the presence of small (if at all) and less replicable links between genes and personality traits (i.e., missing heritability problem).

7. *Clarifying the boundaries of what is to be considered personality or what are different domains of personality.* For a good explanation, causes and consequences have to be independent. Therefore, what is considered personality characteristics have to be ontologically distinct from phenomena that are used for explaining them or that is explained by them. For example, some treatments explain personality variance by individuals' goals and values, whereas sometimes these characteristics are explained by personality—either way, these phenomena should be something independent of personality. However, both goals and values are reflected in personality questionnaire items and thereby constitute parts of personality operationalizations. We welcome proposals that define the boundaries of what we can consider personality and discuss ways of empirically separating putative causes (e.g., nature and nurture) and consequences of personality (e.g., motivation, cognition, emotion, and behavior) from personality characteristics (i.e., motivational, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral tendencies) themselves. Alternative models might provide a way of conceptually and empirically distinguishing between different domains of personality such that it becomes possible to study causal associations among them.

The proposals can be specific to particular types of research problems within the range typical questions in personality research (e.g., personality and life-outcomes or environmental influences on personality). However, they should not be too specific so as to be useful for only a handful of researchers. Preferably, the proposal topics should be general (or generalizable) enough such that a range of research fields and questions can benefit from them.