

The Evolutionary Self: Adaptive Prioritization as a Framework for Personality Structure and Change

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Research Article

Keywords: personality, adaptive prioritization, evolutionary psychology, personality dynamics, person–situation interaction, self-regulation

Posted Date: October 22nd, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-11282193/v1>

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Personality psychology has produced increasingly sophisticated accounts of individual differences through trait, motivational, interpersonal, developmental, and evolutionary approaches. Yet an important theoretical question remains: what principles organize these diverse sources of variation into coherent patterns of behavior across situations and over time? This integrative review proposes the Evolutionary Self, a framework that conceptualizes personality as a dynamic system of adaptive prioritization. Whereas existing models primarily describe personality traits, motivational systems, or the processes producing state variation, the Evolutionary Self focuses on how competing adaptive demands are weighted and coordinated when they cannot be simultaneously maximized. Drawing on evolutionary psychology, behavioral ecology, reinforcement sensitivity theory, attachment theory, self-determination theory, interpersonal models of agency and communion, and dynamic approaches to personality, the framework identifies three candidate domains of recurrent adaptive tension: Opportunity–Protection, Control–Accommodation, and Connection–Self-Reliance. These dimensions are not proposed as mutually exclusive psychological systems. Rather, they represent domains in which individuals must coordinate competing adaptive demands. The framework distinguishes capacities, priorities, states, positions, and trajectories. Capacities describe what an individual can potentially do; priorities describe which motives receive greater weight when competing demands become salient; states describe momentary configurations; position describes the person's characteristic center of gravity; and trajectory describes systematic movement through adaptive space across situations and developmental periods. The model is offered as a theoretical synthesis that generates testable hypotheses concerning personality structure, contextual variability, development, stress response, and behavioral flexibility.

1. Introduction

Personality psychology has generated a rich collection of descriptive and explanatory traditions. Trait models identify relatively enduring patterns of individual differences; motivational theories emphasize goals, needs, and regulatory systems; interpersonal models organize behavior around dimensions such as agency and communion; attachment theory describes the regulation of proximity, security, and exploration; and evolutionary approaches consider how individual differences may reflect alternative solutions to recurrent adaptive problems (Bakan, 1966; Bowlby, 1969; Buss, 1991; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Nettle, 2006).

These traditions have generated substantial knowledge, but they address different levels of explanation. Trait models describe regularities in behavior, whereas motivational and social-cognitive theories attempt to explain why behavior varies across contexts. Evolutionary approaches provide hypotheses concerning the recurrent adaptive problems to which psychological systems may have been calibrated. Dynamic approaches further emphasize that personality is expressed through distributions of momentary states rather than through perfectly invariant behavior (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

The resulting theoretical landscape raises a broader question: What principles organize the different psychological systems that contribute to personality into coherent patterns of adaptive behavior?

Evolutionary and behavioral ecological perspectives suggest that organisms repeatedly confront tradeoffs in the allocation of finite resources, attention, and behavioral effort. Adaptive solutions that increase effectiveness in one domain often impose costs in another. Here, “adaptive” refers to the organization of behavior in response to recurrent problems of adjustment, not to an assumption that every resulting priority or behavior is beneficial, optimal, or fitness-enhancing. Life-history theorists have described development in terms of tradeoffs among growth, maintenance, reproduction, and risk management, while evolutionary psychologists have emphasized recurrent problems that require balancing competing priorities rather than maximizing a single objective (Del Giudice, 2014; Ellis et al., 2009; Stearns, 1992). Personality variation may therefore reflect not merely differences in traits or capacities, but differences in how individuals allocate attention and behavioral resources across recurring adaptive tensions.

Existing personality theories have been highly effective at explaining what tendencies, capacities, motives, and needs individuals possess. Although established theories address goal conflict, self-regulation, motivational dynamics, and person-situation processes, these insights have not generally been organized around a common framework of recurring adaptive prioritization across multiple domains. The Evolutionary Self proposes that personality may be understood partly as a process of adaptive prioritization, through which competing adaptive demands are weighted, coordinated, and resolved across situations and over time.

Human behavior is generated by multiple motivational systems that can be simultaneously active. An individual can be highly sensitive to both opportunity and danger, value both autonomy and close relationships, and possess both the capacity to influence circumstances and the capacity to adapt to them. Personality cannot therefore be reduced simply to the presence or absence of individual psychological capacities.

Instead, individual differences may emerge partly from the characteristic organization, weighting, and coordination of those capacities when competing demands require action. From an evolutionary perspective, this possibility is consistent with the view that human psychology contains mechanisms shaped by recurrent adaptive problems while individuals nevertheless exhibit substantial variation in behavioral strategy (Buss, 1991; Nettle, 2006; Tooby & Cosmides, 1990). From a dynamic perspective, it is consistent with evidence for stable between-person differences and systematic within-person variability across situations (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

The Evolutionary Self integrates these perspectives by proposing that personality can be conceptualized as a dynamic adaptive space within which individuals develop characteristic patterns of motivational prioritization. The proposed framework is not presented as an established model. It is an integrative theoretical proposal whose structure, boundaries, and practical value require empirical evaluation.

2. Review Scope and Approach

This article is an integrative narrative review rather than a systematic review or meta-analysis. Its purpose is theory development: to bring together established literatures that address different components of personality organization and to derive a coherent framework capable of generating specific, testable hypotheses regarding personality structure, adaptation, and change.

The review centers on seven bodies of work selected for their relevance to the proposed model: evolutionary personality psychology and life-history approaches; reinforcement sensitivity theory; attachment theory; self-determination theory; agency–communion and interpersonal models; cybernetic self-regulation; and dynamic person–situation approaches. Sources were included when they offered a foundational theoretical statement, an influential measurement framework, or an integrative account directly relevant to adaptive tradeoffs, motivational coordination, personality stability, or within-person change.

Because the review is selective and theory-driven, it should not be interpreted as an exhaustive survey of personality science. The resulting synthesis is intended to clarify propositions and identify decisive empirical tests, not to claim that the reviewed traditions converge completely or that they establish the proposed three-dimensional structure.

3. Research Context

3.1 Evolutionary Accounts of Personality Variation

Evolutionary approaches treat personality variation as potentially related to recurrent adaptive problems rather than as arbitrary noise. Buss (1991) argued that personality differences can be examined in relation to evolved mechanisms and the social problems they help individuals navigate. Tooby and Cosmides (1990) similarly emphasized the relationship between universal psychological architecture and individual variation, while Nettle (2006) described how trait variation may persist when the benefits and costs of a tendency depend on context.

Life-history theory adds a resource-allocation perspective. Organisms cannot maximize every adaptive objective simultaneously, and investments in one domain may constrain investments in another (Stearns, 1992). Human applications of life-history reasoning have examined how environmental harshness, unpredictability, development, risk, and allocation strategies may relate to behavioral variation (Del Giudice, 2014; Ellis et al., 2009). These accounts do not establish the Evolutionary Self dimensions, but they support the broader premise that adaptive organization involves tradeoffs and conditional prioritization.

3.2 Motivational Systems and Reinforcement Sensitivity

Reinforcement sensitivity research distinguishes appetitive and aversive motivational processes. Carver and White's (1994) BIS/BAS scales operationalized individual differences in behavioral inhibition and

activation, and Corr (2004) reviewed the relationship between reinforcement sensitivity theory and personality. This literature is important because it resists a simplistic assumption that approach and avoidance must be opposite ends of a single mechanism.

The Evolutionary Self therefore distinguishes motivational capacity from adaptive priority. A person may be sensitive to both gains and threats. The proposed question is not which capacity exists, but which consideration receives more weight when the person must coordinate attention, regulation, and action.

3.3 Agency, Communion, Attachment, and Self-Determination

Bakan (1966) described agency and communion as broad modalities of individual existence and participation in larger social entities. Wiggins (1991) later treated agency and communion as conceptual coordinates for understanding interpersonal behavior. These traditions provide historical and interpersonal precedents for examining self-assertion, differentiation, connection, and relational participation as organizing concerns.

Attachment theory emphasizes the adaptive significance of proximity, security, and the availability of attachment figures as a base for exploration (Bowlby, 1969). Self-determination theory identifies autonomy and relatedness as distinct psychological needs important to motivation and functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Together, these literatures suggest that connection and independent self-direction can both be psychologically important without being mutually exclusive.

3.4 Dynamic Personality and Person–Situation Interaction

Mischel and Shoda's (1995) cognitive-affective system theory reconceptualized personality in terms of stable processing systems that can produce distinctive patterns of variability across situations. Whole Trait Theory similarly links trait descriptions to distributions of momentary states and explanatory social-cognitive mechanisms (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015). Research on adult trait development further shows that stability and change can coexist across the life course (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008).

These approaches shift attention from a single score toward distributions, contingencies, and change. Recent work in personality dynamics increasingly characterizes personality not simply as a collection of stable traits but as a system of processes that generate patterned distributions of states across time and situations. Dynamic approaches emphasize within-person variability, state expression, self-regulation, and interactions between individuals and contexts as central features of personality rather than sources of measurement error (Jayawickreme et al., 2021; Wu & Hu, 2023). Recent work has organized several candidate mechanisms through which personality change may occur, while emphasizing that evidence for these mechanisms remains incomplete (Jackson & Wright, 2024). The Evolutionary Self builds on this emerging perspective by proposing adaptive prioritization as one candidate mechanism through which recurrent personality patterns emerge.

3.5 The Need for an Integrative Framework

McAdams and Pals (2006) argued for an integrative science of personality that differentiates levels of personality while connecting dispositional traits to characteristic adaptations, life narratives, and evolutionary foundations. The Evolutionary Self follows this integrative ambition but focuses more narrowly on the coordination of competing adaptive demands.

The framework does not claim that the reviewed literatures share identical constructs. Instead, it asks whether their recurring concerns can be organized into a small number of higher-order domains that are useful enough to justify empirical testing.

4. The Evolutionary Self Framework

4.1 The Central Claim

The central claim of the Evolutionary Self is that personality can be understood partly as a process of adaptive prioritization. Individuals often possess multiple adaptive capacities simultaneously, yet those capacities cannot always be expressed or maximized at the same time. Stable personality emerges in part from recurring patterns in how competing adaptive demands are prioritized, coordinated, and resolved across situations and over time.

This proposition differs from the claim that personality consists of a small number of underlying motivational systems. Humans can possess sensitivity to reward and threat, capacities for autonomy and attachment, and capacities for environmental control and behavioral accommodation at the same time. The question posed by the Evolutionary Self is therefore not simply how strongly an individual possesses a particular capacity. It is which priorities tend to organize perception, decision making, regulation, and behavior when multiple adaptive demands become simultaneously relevant.

This distinction accommodates apparently contradictory characteristics. An individual may be ambitious and cautious, independent and relationally committed, or assertive and flexible. What differentiates individuals may be not only the magnitude of their capacities, but the circumstances under which each capacity becomes behaviorally dominant.

4.2 Capacities and Adaptive Priorities

Psychological capacities refer to systems or abilities that enable particular forms of perception, motivation, regulation, or behavior. Illustrative capacities include sensitivity to reward, sensitivity to threat, attachment, autonomy, environmental control, and behavioral flexibility. These capacities need not be mutually exclusive.

Adaptive priorities refer to the relative weighting of competing motivations when multiple possibilities are available. Two individuals may recognize the same opportunity and danger but organize action differently. Likewise, two people may value both relationship and independence but differ in which receives greater priority when the demands conflict. Prioritization need not be conscious or deliberative; it may emerge through automatic appraisal, affective salience, learned contingencies, reflective

judgment, or combinations of these processes. Adaptive priorities should not be confused with values, goals, or coping strategies. Values concern what an individual considers important, goals identify desired outcomes, and coping strategies describe responses to stress or demands. Adaptive priorities instead concern the relative weighting of competing adaptive concerns when they become jointly relevant.

Conceptually, situational cues and personal history influence appraisal; appraisal activates and weights competing priorities; and priorities then shape, but do not uniquely determine, behavior within the constraints of capacity and opportunity.

Adaptive priorities therefore represent a proposed level of organization above individual motivational capacities. The empirical question is whether those priorities are best represented as bipolar continua, partially independent components, conditional decision rules, or some combination of these structures.

4.3 Why These Three Candidate Dimensions?

The selection of Opportunity–Protection, Control–Accommodation, and Connection–Self-Reliance is based not merely on their recurrence in existing theories, but on the possibility that they represent three functionally distinct questions embedded in adaptive responding. When individuals encounter consequential environmental or social conditions, they must often coordinate at least three forms of prioritization: whether to emphasize potential gain or the prevention of loss; whether adaptation should proceed primarily by altering external circumstances or adjusting one’s own behavior; and whether regulation should rely primarily on interpersonal coordination or independent functioning.

The first domain, Opportunity–Protection, concerns the adaptive objective that receives greater weight under conditions of uncertainty. Resource abundance, scarcity, competition, volatility, and threat can make potential gains and potential losses simultaneously salient. The individual must allocate attention and effort between expanding possibilities and safeguarding existing resources, security, or functioning. This domain therefore addresses what is being prioritized rather than the particular behavior used to achieve it.

The second domain, Control–Accommodation, concerns the direction of adaptive regulation. Environmental conditions vary in perceived and actual controllability. When circumstances appear modifiable, influence, intervention, environmental shaping, and active problem solving may receive greater priority. When constraints are resistant, costly, or impossible to alter, behavioral adjustment, flexibility, and optimization within existing conditions may become more adaptive. This domain therefore concerns whether discrepancy reduction is directed primarily toward changing the environment or changing one’s response to it.

The third domain, Connection–Self-Reliance, concerns the social organization of adaptation. Human adaptive problems can be addressed through attachment, coalition formation, cooperation, shared knowledge, mutual protection, and co-regulation, but humans must also retain capacities for autonomous judgment, independent action, and functioning when assistance is unavailable or costly.

Conditions involving dependence, belonging, exclusion, interpersonal reliability, and access to collective resources may therefore alter the relative priority assigned to connection and self-directed functioning.

These domains are analytically distinct even though they may interact in behavior. Scarcity, for example, may heighten Protection prioritization, but it could also evoke Opportunity-oriented resource seeking. A person might respond through Control by attempting to alter resource access, through Accommodation by reducing consumption or adjusting expectations, through Connection by seeking coalition support, or through Self-Reliance by reducing dependence on unreliable others. Threat could likewise produce different configurations depending on its controllability, the availability of social support, prior learning, and the individual's characteristic priorities.

The three-dimensional proposal therefore does not claim that particular environmental conditions determine particular poles. Conditions provide adaptive problems; appraisal and context influence which priorities become salient; and the resulting state represents a coordinated configuration across the three domains. The proposed dimensions are intended to characterize different aspects of that coordination: what adaptive outcome is prioritized, where change is directed, and how adaptation is socially organized.

These considerations provide a theoretical rationale for testing three dimensions, but they do not establish that three dimensions are psychometrically sufficient. Additional domains may be necessary, the proposed poles may prove partly independent, and interactions may account for more variance than additive coordinates. The three-dimensional structure should therefore be evaluated against broader and alternative models rather than assumed from conceptual fit alone.

5. Three Candidate Domains of Adaptive Prioritization

5.1 Opportunity Prioritization and Protection Prioritization

The first domain concerns how individuals weight potential gains and potential costs under uncertainty. Opportunity prioritization directs attention toward potential gains, exploration, growth, achievement, novelty, and expansion of possibilities. Protection prioritization directs attention toward potential losses, threat, vulnerability, security, stability, and avoidance of harm.

The distinction is compatible with research on appetitive and aversive motivational systems while extending that research from motivational sensitivity to adaptive coordination (Carver & White, 1994; Corr, 2004). It does not assume that opportunity seeking and protection are mutually exclusive. A person can strongly desire an opportunity and simultaneously be concerned about failure. The proposed construct concerns the relative priority afforded to opportunity and protection when competing considerations must be coordinated.

The adaptive value of each priority is context-dependent. Exploration may generate resources, status, knowledge, or novel opportunities, but may increase exposure to uncertainty and loss. Protection may

preserve resources and reduce danger, but excessive protection may constrain exploration. The domain can also be understood as a generalized expression of exploration–exploitation and risk–reward dilemmas described in evolutionary and behavioral ecological work (Del Giudice, 2014; Nettle, 2006).

5.2 Control Prioritization and Accommodation

Prioritization

The second domain concerns responses to environmental constraints. Control prioritization involves attempts to modify external circumstances through initiative, assertiveness, environmental shaping, active problem solving, and goal-directed intervention. Accommodation prioritization involves modifying one's own behavior through flexibility, adjustment, contextual responsiveness, behavioral plasticity, and optimization within constraints.

The distinction is related to work on agency and self-regulation while defining the issue specifically as a relationship between the person and environmental constraints (Bakan, 1966; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). It is also consistent with cybernetic models in which organisms compare current states with desired states and act to reduce discrepancies (Carver & Scheier, 1998). The present framework proposes that individuals may differ in their characteristic preference for changing the environment, changing their response, or shifting between the two.

Control and accommodation should not be equated with strength and weakness. Active intervention can be effective when circumstances are modifiable. Accommodation can be effective when conditions are resistant to control, rapidly changing, or costly to alter. The relevant difference is not dominance versus passivity, but the characteristic regulation of environmental modification and self-adjustment.

5.3 Connection Prioritization and Self-Reliance

Prioritization

The third domain concerns the regulation of interdependence and individual functioning. Connection prioritization emphasizes relational security, interpersonal support, collaboration, shared meaning, social coordination, and co-regulation. Self-reliance prioritization emphasizes independence, self-direction, autonomy, internal regulation, individual decision making, and freedom from dependence.

Attachment theory describes the significance of close relationships and attachment figures as a foundation for security and exploration (Bowlby, 1969). Self-determination theory identifies relatedness and autonomy as distinct needs rather than opposite ends of a single continuum (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Agency–communion models also distinguish differentiation and mastery from participation and relational connection (Bakan, 1966; Wiggins, 1991).

Humans are simultaneously social and autonomous organisms. Social bonds provide protection, cooperation, information, and resources, while independent functioning facilitates exploration, decision making, and adaptation when support is unavailable. The proposed domain concerns how individuals

characteristically coordinate interdependence and self-directed functioning, not whether one capacity is present and the other absent.

6. Adaptive Prioritization as Resource Allocation

The proposed framework can also be understood through adaptive resource allocation. Human beings possess finite resources of attention, energy, time, information processing, and behavioral effort. Adaptive functioning therefore requires continual allocation decisions.

Some individuals may devote greater attention to identifying opportunities, while others devote more attention to uncertainty and potential losses. Some invest effort in changing circumstances, while others emphasize adjustment to existing conditions. Some rely heavily on social coordination, while others invest more strongly in independent functioning.

The Evolutionary Self proposes that personality emerges partly through repeated patterns of allocating finite adaptive resources across these domains. The dimensions are therefore not merely trait labels. They are hypothesized categories of adaptive investment and motivational coordination. This interpretation is consistent with perspectives that conceptualize behavior as management of competing demands rather than optimization of a single objective (Del Giudice, 2014; Ellis et al., 2009; Stearns, 1992).

7. Personality as Adaptive Space

7.1 Position

Taken together, the proposed domains define a conceptual adaptive space. An individual's characteristic configuration can be represented as a location within this landscape. The framework uses position to describe this characteristic location.

Position does not imply a fixed psychological point. It represents a relatively stable center of gravity across time and situations. In terms consistent with Whole Trait Theory, a position may be estimated from the distribution of repeated state observations rather than from an assumption of invariant behavior (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015).

7.2 State

Adaptive priorities are expected to vary across situations. Stress, opportunity, loss, interpersonal demands, resource availability, and developmental circumstances may alter which considerations become salient. The framework refers to a momentary configuration as a state.

States are not departures from personality. They are situational expressions of the broader system. Position should influence the probability of particular states without determining them completely. Conceptually, the relationship is position → probability of states across situations rather than position →

fixed behavioral response. This view is consistent with person–situation, whole-trait and modern psychometric modeling approaches that integrate trait and process perspectives (Bader, Columbus, Zettler, & Mayer, 2025; Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; Mischel & Shoda, 1995).

7.3 Trajectory

Trajectory describes how an individual's configuration changes across situations and time. Two individuals may have similar positions but respond differently when conditions change. One may shift toward protection and self-reliance under stress, while another shifts toward connection and accommodation. A third may respond to challenge by increasing opportunity and control priorities.

These patterns may represent meaningful differences in regulatory dynamics even when long-term averages are similar. Trajectory is therefore a hypothesis about characteristic pathways through adaptive space. It should not be assumed to exist merely because the geometry permits it. Demonstrating trajectory would require repeated measurement, reliable state assessment, and evidence that within-person movement is systematic, replicable, and predictive.

The broader literatures support the plausibility of stability, within-person variability, and long-term change (Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2015; Mischel & Shoda, 1995; Roberts & Mroczek, 2008). Recent evidence indicates meaningful individual heterogeneity in longitudinal within-person variability around personality trajectories, suggesting that such deviations should not automatically be treated as homogeneous measurement noise (Wright & Jackson, 2025). Whether those dynamics are accurately represented as movement through the proposed adaptive space remains an empirical question.

8. Relationship to Existing Models

8.1 Big Five and Integrative Trait Science

The Big Five provides a highly developed descriptive taxonomy of broad trait variation. The Evolutionary Self is not proposed as a replacement for that taxonomy. It instead asks whether adaptive prioritization provides a complementary level of explanation for some of the behavioral regularities captured by traits.

Opportunity–Protection may correlate with Extraversion and Neuroticism-related content; Control–Accommodation may overlap with assertiveness, conscientiousness, or flexibility; and Connection–Self-Reliance may overlap with Agreeableness and interpersonal facets. Convergence is expected. The decisive question is whether the proposed constructs retain discriminant meaning and contribute incremental prediction after established traits are measured.

McAdams and Pals (2006) emphasized the need to connect dispositional traits with characteristic adaptations and broader integrative principles. The Evolutionary Self is best understood as a candidate model of characteristic adaptive organization rather than as a competing trait vocabulary.

8.2 Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory

Reinforcement sensitivity theory provides an important foundation for distinguishing appetitive and aversive processes (Carver & White, 1994; Corr, 2004). The Evolutionary Self adds a coordination hypothesis: when both opportunity and protection signals are active, people may differ in how those signals are weighted in action. This extension must be tested rather than inferred from existing RST measures.

8.3 Self-Determination, Attachment, and Interpersonal Models

Self-determination theory, attachment theory, and agency–communion frameworks provide related but nonidentical accounts of autonomy, relatedness, security, differentiation, and interpersonal behavior (Bakan, 1966; Bowlby, 1969; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Wiggins, 1991). The Evolutionary Self organizes selected elements of these traditions within Connection–Self-Reliance but does not collapse their distinct constructs. Attachment security, need satisfaction, communion, and self-reliance may relate to different portions of the proposed domain.

8.4 Typological and Workplace Assessments

The Evolutionary Self does not assume discrete personality categories. Widely used typological and workplace assessments may offer accessible language for recurrent behavioral patterns, but the present framework treats any apparent types as possible clusters or regions within continuous space.

This distinction is important for both science and practice. A continuous model can preserve individual variation within a region and avoid treating a threshold as a categorical boundary. Any mapping of existing types into the Evolutionary Self would require direct comparative measurement and should not be based solely on descriptive resemblance.

9. Discussion

9.1 Theoretical Contributions

9.1.1 Prioritization as a level of personality organization

Traditional frameworks focus heavily on psychological capacities—describing what an individual is able or motivated to do. In contrast, the Evolutionary Self distinguishes between capacities and priorities. Because individuals continuously face trade-offs where legitimate goals conflict (e.g., opportunity versus protection), stable individual differences emerge from the characteristic weighting and coordination of these capacities. This pattern of weighting and coordination is proposed as a potentially distinct and underexamined level of personality organization.

9.1.2 Integrating stability and variability

The framework provides a unified conceptual structure for the coexistence of stable traits and within-person fluctuations. By defining Position as an individual's characteristic center of adaptive prioritization, State as the momentary configuration expressed in a specific context, and Trajectory as the systematic pattern of movement through adaptive space over time, it provides an analytical vocabulary to model how stable systems express themselves dynamically without treating variation as measurement error.

9.1.3 Comparative and falsifiable predictions

By moving from descriptive trait inventories to an adaptive resource-allocation model, the framework generates explicit, falsifiable propositions regarding behavior under constraint. It offers testable hypotheses about how individuals with similar baseline profiles diverge when responding to acute stress, organizational change, or structural uncertainty, providing predictive value that extends beyond static, main-effect trait descriptions.

9.2 Adaptive Prioritization and Personality Dynamics

The concept of adaptive prioritization complements contemporary personality-dynamics literature by proposing a higher-order framework for understanding how context-dependent behavioral conflicts may be resolved. While modern frameworks successfully characterize personality as a system of processes generating distributions of states over time, the Evolutionary Self introduces recurring adaptive trade-offs as the organizing principle that may help organize those distributions. By framing personality as a dynamic system for coordinating action under constraint, this model provides a functional bridge between established latent trait structures and real-time behavioral contingencies.

9.3 Proposed Research Program

The first research phase should develop broad item pools for each proposed pole without forcing bipolar scoring. Exploratory analyses should compare a three-axis model, six partially independent components, hierarchical alternatives, and models that allow correlated poles. Independent-sample confirmatory analyses should then test the best-performing structures.

The second phase should examine convergent and discriminant validity against Big Five traits, reinforcement sensitivity constructs, agency and communion, attachment, autonomy, relatedness, control beliefs, and flexibility. The model must demonstrate that its constructs are neither arbitrary composites nor redundant labels.

The third phase should evaluate state measurement through intensive longitudinal designs. Experience sampling could test whether momentary priority configurations can be measured reliably and whether repeated observations yield interpretable positions. Trajectory claims should require evidence of systematic within-person slopes, transitions, or conditional movement across specified contexts.

The fourth phase should test incremental and criterion validity. Relevant outcomes might include responses to uncertainty, decision making under risk, adaptation to organizational change, leadership

behavior under pressure, conflict strategy, team coordination, and coaching outcomes. Comparative studies should test whether the Evolutionary Self adds predictive value beyond established measures.

Organizational validation would also require measurement invariance, subgroup fairness, resistance to faking, test–retest evidence, and clear boundaries for appropriate use. Commercial usefulness cannot substitute for psychometric validity, but practical outcomes can provide strong tests of whether the framework captures consequential behavior.

9.4 Theoretical Implications and Comparative Predictions

The value of the Evolutionary Self depends not on whether it offers intuitive dimensions, but on whether it generates novel and falsifiable predictions beyond existing models.

The framework proposes that individuals differ not only in motivational sensitivities or psychological capacities, but also in how competing adaptive demands are prioritized under comparable circumstances. If this proposition is correct, similarities in trait profiles should not necessarily imply similarities in behavioral decision-making. Individuals with comparable levels of extraversion, neuroticism, attachment security, or autonomy may nevertheless differ in how they respond when opportunities involve substantial risk, when environmental conditions become resistant to influence, or when interpersonal obligations conflict with independent action.

This possibility suggests several empirical questions. Do stable individual differences exist in adaptive prioritization after established trait and motivational measures are taken into account? Do those differences predict choices in situations characterized by genuine tradeoffs? Can adaptive priorities be measured reliably across contexts while remaining distinguishable from traits, goals, values, and coping strategies? Finally, do characteristic trajectories of movement emerge when individuals repeatedly encounter similar adaptive challenges?

A related implication concerns the limitations of explanations that examine psychological capacities primarily in isolation. Existing theories of traits, motives, needs, and psychological systems provide essential components of personality explanation. However, additional explanatory value may come from examining how multiple adaptive demands are coordinated when they become jointly relevant. Many influential theories focus on specific traits, motives, needs, or psychological systems. These constructs have substantial empirical support and remain important components of personality science. However, explaining behavior solely in terms of isolated capacities may overlook how multiple adaptive demands are coordinated in real-world situations. Individuals rarely confront opportunities, threats, social obligations, autonomy needs, and environmental constraints independently. The same observable behavior may emerge from different configurations of competing priorities, and similar capacities may produce different outcomes depending on how they are weighted when demands conflict. The Evolutionary Self therefore proposes that personality organization may require analysis not only of component systems, but also of the processes through which those systems are integrated and prioritized.

These propositions should be evaluated through direct comparison with competing explanations rather than through isolated testing of the preferred model. The framework gains scientific value only to the extent that adaptive prioritization demonstrates explanatory or predictive significance beyond established accounts of personality and motivation.

9.5 Construct Boundaries and Alternative Explanations

A rigorous validation program must specify what adaptive prioritization is not. Opportunity prioritization is not identical to positive affect, sensation seeking, optimism, extraversion, or behavioral activation. Protection prioritization is not identical to anxiety, neuroticism, pessimism, or behavioral inhibition. Control prioritization is not identical to conscientiousness, dominance, internal locus of control, self-efficacy, or proactive personality. Accommodation prioritization is not equivalent to compliance, passivity, low agency, or agreeableness. Connection prioritization is not simply sociability or attachment security, and self-reliance is not the absence of relatedness.

These distinctions matter because a scale can appear coherent while merely recombining established trait content. Item development should therefore begin with construct definitions, inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria, and examples of ambiguous content. Items that ask whether a person is anxious, organized, sociable, dominant, or independent may reproduce familiar traits without measuring prioritization. More diagnostic items may require conflict, constraint, or tradeoff contexts in which two legitimate demands compete. Such items would ask what tends to guide attention or action when both considerations are salient.

The framework also needs to distinguish preference, capacity, behavior, and outcome. A person may prioritize control but lack the skill or authority to alter the environment. Another may prefer accommodation but be required by role expectations to intervene. Observable behavior can therefore diverge from priority because of competence, opportunity, norms, or consequences. Validation should combine self-report with situational judgment, behavioral observation, informant report, and repeated measurement where feasible. No single method can separate these layers completely.

Context specificity poses a further challenge. An individual may prioritize opportunity in career decisions, protection in financial decisions, control in work settings, accommodation in family settings, connection during loss, and self-reliance during routine problem solving. A global score may obscure meaningful domain variation. Research should test whether adaptive priorities generalize across contexts, organize hierarchically beneath a broad tendency, or require domain-specific profiles. The appropriate level of abstraction should be determined empirically.

The proposed spatial representation also creates mathematical assumptions that must be examined. Distances may not be psychologically equal across the space. The dimensions may interact nonlinearly. Some regions may be common and others rare. Movement may occur along curved pathways or discontinuous transitions rather than straight lines. A three-dimensional visualization can remain useful

even if the latent structure is more complex, but the paper should distinguish a communicative map from a literal claim about Euclidean psychological geometry.

9.6 Falsifiable Propositions

The framework will gain scientific value only if it identifies results that would count against it. Several propositions follow from the present review. First, measures of adaptive prioritization should form replicable constructs that are not exhausted by existing trait, motivational, attachment, and interpersonal measures. Second, the proposed constructs should predict theoretically relevant choices in situations that activate competing demands. Third, repeated state assessments should produce stable individual differences in average position and systematic within-person variability. Fourth, any claimed trajectory should replicate across comparable conditions and predict an outcome beyond average position and state variance.

The model would be weakened if item pools consistently resolve into established trait dimensions with no meaningful residual structure; if the proposed poles behave as unrelated capacities without evidence of prioritization; if state scores are dominated by measurement error; or if trajectories cannot be distinguished from temporary mood, common method variance, or retrospective storytelling. Failure of one level does not necessarily invalidate all others. For example, useful position constructs could survive a failure to validate trajectory. Failure of the three-domain structure, however, would require a more fundamental revision.

A strong test should compare multiple plausible models rather than testing only whether the preferred model fits adequately. Alternatives include three bipolar dimensions, six correlated capacities, a bifactor or hierarchical model, established trait models, and hybrid models in which capacities predict context-dependent priorities. Predictive studies should preregister outcomes and compare incremental validity using held-out data. Longitudinal studies should separate within-person and between-person effects. Organizational studies should define criteria independently of assessment scores and avoid circular validation through supervisor impressions that merely restate item content.

These propositions clarify the status of the Evolutionary Self. It is not presently a validated assessment or a demonstrated map of personality. It is a structured theoretical claim about how capacities might be coordinated, accompanied by a research program designed to expose the claim to disconfirmation. Its eventual value will depend less on the elegance of the map than on the quality of the tests it survives.

10. Limitations and Future Directions

The present framework is a theoretical proposal rather than a completed model of personality structure. The review is selective and integrative rather than systematic, and the literature cited supports components of the synthesis rather than the proposed structure as a whole.

The framework does not assume that all personality variation can be reduced to three dimensions. Additional adaptive tradeoffs may be necessary. The poles may also prove partially independent rather

than bipolar, and the most accurate representation may not be a Euclidean three-dimensional space.

The resource-allocation language is theoretical and should not be interpreted as evidence that attention, time, or energy have been directly measured in the proposed domains. Likewise, evolutionary plausibility does not establish evolved function, adaptive value, or present-day benefit.

Position, state, and trajectory may require different measurement designs. Position may be estimated by conventional self-report or repeated-state averages; state requires context-sensitive assessment; trajectory requires longitudinal evidence. Failure to validate trajectory would narrow the model but would not necessarily invalidate useful position or state constructs. Conversely, failure of the proposed factor structure would require revision of the geometry itself.

The current objective is not to assert that personality consists of exactly three adaptive tradeoffs. It is to determine whether these domains provide a useful and empirically tractable representation of recurring patterns in human adaptation.

11. Conclusion

Personality science has developed powerful descriptions of stable individual differences and increasingly sophisticated accounts of motivational, interpersonal, evolutionary, and situational processes. The Evolutionary Self proposes that one bridge among these traditions may be found in adaptive prioritization: the characteristic coordination of competing demands when action is required.

The framework identifies three candidate domains: Opportunity–Protection, Control–Accommodation, and Connection–Self-Reliance. It further distinguishes capacity from priority and position from state and trajectory. In this account, personality is neither a fixed point nor unlimited situational variability. It is a relatively stable organization expressed through distributions and potentially through characteristic pathways of change.

The proposal is intentionally provisional. Its contribution is not the assertion that a three-dimensional personality space has already been discovered, but the articulation of a research program capable of confirming, modifying, or rejecting that possibility. If the dimensions prove coherent and predictive, the model may offer a useful account of how people navigate uncertainty, environmental constraints, and interdependence. If they do not, the tests required by the framework should clarify where the synthesis fails and what a more accurate model requires. The framework also invites comparison with alternative integrative models and encourages cumulative refinement through transparent, preregistered, and replicable research.

Declarations

Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests: none

Data availability: No new data were generated or analyzed for this theoretical review.

Author Contribution

Brian Donnelly conceived the Evolutionary Self framework, conducted the literature review, developed the theoretical synthesis, and drafted and revised the manuscript.

Use of Generative AI: During preparation of this work, the author used ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot to support manuscript organization, language refinement, and critical interrogation of an author-developed theoretical framework. The conceptual model, selection and interpretation of scholarly sources, theoretical claims, and conclusions were determined and verified by the author. The author reviewed and revised all AI-assisted output and takes full responsibility for the content of the article.

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