THE LONG ROAD FROM MARGINAL DEVIATIONS TO MAJOR EFFECTS
Commentary on the chapter by G.V. Caprara

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Marginal Deviations

Caprara's contribution presents a number of important ideas for improving research outcomes in the area of early indicators of social maladjustment and social deviation. His suggestions focus on a process as opposed to a trait orientation and challenge major assumptions underlying the trait approach to personality. Caprara’s conceptual framework is mainly based on social psychological theories and emphasizes the social rather than the biological approach to individuality.

Trait oriented research (Olweus, 1979) has demonstrated that childhood aggressiveness, as measured by peer nominations and ratings by parents and teachers, is a stable trait that predicts adult social maladjustment and deviation. Moreover, Caprara points out that "an aggressive child is more likely to become an aggressive adult than a sociable or conscientious child is to become an equally sociable or conscientious adult" (p. 4), and thus acknowledges that trait aggression is one of the more stable traits.

To increase our understanding and to improve detection of children at risk, Caprara argues that it is "worth going beyond the objective manifestation of aggressive behaviour and of rejection to investigate the system of affects, representations, meanings, rules and shared expectations" (p. 4). More importantly, he asserts that "an original sensitivity towards that which is subtle, nuanced, tenuous, indistinct and marginal becomes crucial" (p. 3).

Caprara’s plea for studying marginal deviations is in tune with basic assumptions underlying developmental psychology. Development is conceived as a process of increasing differentiation from birth to adulthood. Looking at development in retrospect, it seems logical to assume that major deviations in adulthood, must have been reflected by minor or marginal deviations at some point in development. Case studies often document marginal childhood indicators that escaped the attention of teachers and parents. No matter how convincing such studies may be, it cannot be ruled out that retrospective evidence is often unreliable and blurred by hindsight (Halverson, 1988). The crucial evidence needed to establish the significance of marginal deviations has to come from prospective or longitudinal studies. Caprara suggests that assessment of certain process variables, in addition to the assessment of childhood aggressive behaviour, would increase our understanding of the underlying mechanisms and improve risk assessment and prediction of adult deviation. It is difficult to judge the value of this approach without longitudinal data. Moreover, marginal deviations are
by definition minor deviations and evidence about the intra-individual stability of these mar-
ginal deviations should be supplied. Furthermore some rule should be given to distinguish "marginal" from "major" and "insignificant" deviations. Only intra-individually stable marginal deviations will provide the cumulative effect that Caprara expects from the aggregation of marginal differences.

The more important question is not whether and how marginal deviations should be studied but which marginal deviations should be assessed. Caprara’s selection of process variables is in tune with current issues in person perception research: attribution of emotions (Weiner, 1986), recognition of facial expressions (Ekman and Friesen, 1975) and perception of various forms of social influence. These variables emerge from social psychological theories that focus on effects of experimental conditions and tend to ignore inter and intra-individual differences. The validity of these variables as indicators of reliable individual differences is not yet established. Moreover, it is difficult to link these variables to taxonomies of individual differences such as the five-factor model or Eysenck’s PEN-model. This of course does not impede the value of these variables but given the growing consensus about the value of such taxonomies for establishing nomological networks (Costa and McCrae, 1992), new variables are more readily accepted when they can be linked to such a conceptual network.

Aggregation of Effects

One of the more interesting assertions from attribution theory is that lay perceivers tend to match the size of cause and effect (Kelley, 1967). Minor effects are produced by minor causes and hence major effects require major causes. Caprara suggests that major effects can be caused by the cumulative effect of minor deviations. Trait approaches are inclined to explain major behavioral effects by looking for major deviations on one or a few traits. In principle, trait theories could attribute major effects to an accumulation of effects produced by minor deviations on many traits. Trait theories do not adopt this strategy because they are based on structural analysis. Factor analysis groups related "minor" traits in "major" or broad band fac-
tors. Process oriented approaches, such as the one proposed by Caprara, tend to ignore structural analysis of relationships among variables derived as process indicators. It would be useful to look at the structural relations between the person perception variables proposed by Caprara. If accuracy of attribution of emotions, decoding of facial expressions and preferred social influence style correlate to some extent, then aggregation of these variables into a broad band process variable such as accuracy of person perception is indicated and the presumed contradiction between the process and the trait approach could be reduced. Moreover, aggregation of process variables into a broad band process variable such as accuracy of person perception, would perhaps transform the observed minor deviations into a major deviation on the broad band variable. Structural analysis of these process variables together with traditional trait measures might also reveal significant relationships with Eysenck’s PEN-model variables and those included in the five-factor model.

Disruption of Continuity

Caprara states that "teachers and children share a tendency to confuse emotional instability with aggression" (p.7). My own research ((Mervielde 1991, De Fruyt and Mervielde 1992)