

Rigidity

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The concept of psychological rigidity has been investigated since the early part of this century, occasionally under other labels, such as proactive inhibition or perseveration. The latter concepts have been defined as the tendency to persist in a behavior that was appropriate in the past when that behavior ceases to be appropriate under new circumstances. Rigidity per se was first investigated systematically by Kounin (1941) taking a Lewinian approach. Kounin speculated that behavioral rigidity was a developmental phenomenon that expressed behavioral differentiation from a concrete and rigid pattern in childhood, progressing to increased flexibility as young adulthood was reached, with a return to greater rigidity in advanced age. Chown (1959) examined a variety of definitions of rigidity and termed rigidity to be a rather "flexible" and multi-dimensional concept. She concluded further that most studies of rigidity showed a high negative correlation between rigidity and intelligence.

Factor analytic studies of measures of rigidity have shown that the rigidity construct has at least three major dimensions (cf. Schaie & Parham, 1975): (1) *psychomotor speed* (rigid persons have difficulty making rapid cognitive responses involving motoric behaviors); (2) *motor-cognitive rigidity* (rigid persons show greater interference when the conditions for a motor-cognitive response are altered or reversed); and (3) *personality-perceptual or attitudinal rigidity* (rigid persons express attitudes

that reflect difficulties in dealing with ambiguous situations and reluctance to respond flexibly under changing circumstances).

Because of the substantial correlation of rigidity with measures of intelligence it has sometimes been questioned whether the above dimensions might be no more than alternate measures of established intelligence dimensions. However, when measures of the above rigidity dimensions were factored together with measures of six major ability dimensions, they retained their distinct status (Schaie, Dutta, & Willis, 1991).

The three rigidity dimensions have been investigated both cross-sectionally and longitudinally over the age range from 22 to 88 (Schaie, 1996). Longitudinal findings suggest that Psychomotor Speed increases through young adulthood and middle age and peaks at age 60, followed by a sharp decline. Motor-cognitive rigidity declines slightly until the age 60, with a moderate increase thereafter. Attitudinal rigidity decreases until early middle age, remains stable thereafter until age 60, and also moderately increases thereafter. Modest positive cohort differences in rigidity have also been noted, with more recent cohorts showing increased psychomotor speed and lower rigidity. High scores in psychomotor speed and low scores on the rigidity factors in mid-life have been found to predict high levels of intellectual functioning in old age. (Schaie, 1996). Individuals' experience of complex work environments and other stimulating environmental conditions have been found to be predictive of low levels of rigidity. (Schooler, 1984).

References

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