

Cross-situational specificity and cognitive, emotional and behavioural choices: A new model in the teaching and practice of cognitive-behavioural therapy¹

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Abstract

The present paper is a proposal to a new model, the theorization of which is set in this article. It presents and discusses the importance of context specificity of eventful experiences in terms of cognitive, emotional and behavioural choices. Cognitive, emotional and behavioural choices are approached as depending on contextual changes due to environmental contingencies. Environmental contingencies (triggers) are regarded as precursors to core beliefs and rules for living in cognitive-behavioural therapy. The aim of this paper is to consider contextual changes as bringing upon changes to personality traits, which in turn influence cognitive, emotional and behavioural domains of human psyche. The main topic of discussion is centred around the premise that, teaching cognitive-behavioural therapy in line with changes occurring within the person, needs to be re-focused on the contextual changes taking place outside the person, as provoking internal changes not only in personality traits, but to the person's cognitive appraisals and choices related to given environments.

Keywords: cognitive-behavioural therapy, personality, context, situation-specificity, change

Prolegomena

Personality is a dynamic and functional field of reactions and counter-reactions to given circumstances (Orom & Cervone, 2009). Personality's attributes associate to cultures, values, principles and one's lifestyle (Killen, 1997). By 'attributes', I consider traits that depend on one's preferences and choices interwoven to the aspect of personality in the form of openness, conscientiousness, extraversion/introversion, agreeableness and neuroticism: the so-called Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 1992; Pervin et al., 2005). Personality is always subject to changes that take place in line with context and situation-specificity. Context and situation-specificity refer to environmental and factorial characteristics, such as autonomy, engagement and commitment (Lukens, et al., 2013), which influence one's here and now with relevance to one's interpretations of how occurrences could be explained (LeBaron, 2003). In cognitive-behavioural therapy literature, the aspect of personality hasn't been clearly studied, as we see for instance in the case of social phobia (McAleavey et al., 2014). By that, I mean it hasn't been approached in the light of trait psychology, but in the light of faulty cognitive appraisals that take place in the presence

¹ For short, cognitive-behavioural therapy will be referred sometimes as CBT.

of everyday experiences (Korpela et al., 2001). Cognitive-behavioural therapy explores the Big Five personality traits by means of questionnaires and inventories, so particular conditions to be identified (O'Connor, 2002) and mental states to be interpreted (Matthews, et al., 2003). To give an example, the trait of agreeableness is regarded as diagnostic evidence in the case of borderline personality disorder, where individuals manifest an ill-tempered and offensive disposition against what happens in the here and now and in reference to own interpretation of events (Morey & Zanarini, 2000). Cognitive-behavioural therapy considers one's ill-tempered and offensive disposition against occurrences in life as based onto one's core beliefs and assumptions for living that stem from early experiences and critical incidents which lead to neuroticism and closeness (Riso et al., 2007).

Moreover, personality traits are influenced by cross-situational variability, such as events not necessarily taken place in one's, but to others' lives too, to whom one is related to, such as death of a loved one; inability to manage living costs because one's wife lost her job; lack of acceptance from others, etc. (Erickson et al., 2014). In this way, one's traits are explained in terms of convergence and divergence to other individuals, i.e. how one is, or not, related to other individuals in line with interpersonal influences outwardly affecting one's personality, rather than influences that come from within one's person (Heinström, 2003). Cross-situational variability is changeable, rather than consistent, and influences one's personal and interpersonal development in life; i.e. if one loses a job, cannot go back to the same one, but needs to start afresh; in the meantime, looking for another job, the chronological gap into finding one could be short or long, i.e. inconsistent to one's needs and therefore progress-delaying until finding it (English & Chen, 2007). Cognitive-behavioural therapy in dealing with this 'gap' could find itself in a 'treatment difficulty' not in terms of one's 'inside thoughts and feelings', but in terms of how time predisposing and perpetuating faulty cognitions affects personality traits, i.e. if one has become less conscientious with one's own job, how that is proportionately subject to the time the problem is so far experienced (Hashim et al., 2012). What I mean is, CBT by dealing with time's unknown constraints may be found in the position of individuals' continuous relapses, not because they haven't done their homework or didn't practice interventions agreed, but because the problem was 'treated inwardly', and not in relation to the time needed in an analogous proportion to the time lasted (Lynch et al., 2010). What it is suggested, instead, is the 'treatment time' in CBT to be analogous to the number of sessions needed (Williams & Garland, 2002), and not analogous to the time an individual has suffered (Grazebrook & Garland, 2005).

Cross-situational variability is also contextual, for it is related to the aspect of 'behavioural signature', i.e. situation-behaviour relations based on attitudinal/counter-attitudinal choices before foreseen and/or unforeseen circumstances (Collins & Hoyt, 1972). People are engaged in patterns of psychological conditions across contingencies, such as depressive symptomology and effectuated changes (Msetfi et al., 2013), and behaviours related to uniformity changes across situations, such as high or low self-esteem and proximal and/or distal effects of personal commitment to succeeding goals (O'Keefe et al., 2012). Cross-situational uniformity changes and behavioural signature refer to patterns of variations commonly shared by many, i.e. one by suffering from depression the behavioural changes depicting one's condition could be subject to situation-specific causes experienced by others who have suffered that same condition before (Kleftaras & Psarra, 2012).

In this paper, I will consider that by including situation-specific aspects of variability in the teaching of cognitive-behavioural therapy, personality contextual changes could be better explained. The consideration of the present topic wishes to address issues in the teaching of CBT with reference to personality traits, so students and practitioners of this method to acquire not only a good knowledge on the subject, but also how to combine it practically in client work. For this reason, the present paper does not address nor formulates hypotheses to be tested, for my aim in this presentation is to endeavour the relationship between personality traits and cognitive-behavioural therapy, so the combination of both to enhance the theoretical knowledge needed

before any empirical study of it. As an outcome, no methodology is discussed, for no relevant theory is applied, nor any results are presented, the reason being no data have been collected, subject to the absence of participants. In order to be able to test this topic, there is the need this to be first and foremost presented so in a future paper this to be employed as the foundation in view an empirical research to take place.

Discussion of topic

Cross-situational variability is about personal participation in what takes place and influences personalities on an individual and inter-individual level (Nowak et al., 2005). The importance of cross-situational variability for personality psychology associates not with the person per se but with the situation the person finds oneself in. For this reason, individuals depend not on what happens in their life, but on occurrences affecting their lives subject to situation-specific contextual changes (Hummelen & Rokx, 2007). By that it is meant, personality traits are subject to changes occurring within environmental contexts, i.e. one feels depressed not because of early experiences or critical incidents of the past, but because in the here and now one was forced to undertake responsibilities, such as becoming breadwinner, due to a family member's sudden loss, who used to have that responsibility himself (Montiglio et al., 2013).

Individuals tend to think that situation-driven experiences advance personal experiences towards self-improvement and exploration, such as developing independent skills in view to finding a better job (Sedikides & Hepper, 2009). However, not all situation-driven experiences are considered in this way, for at a number of times individuals experience unwanted personal changes due to unforeseen circumstances, such as one who though got shortlisted by having ticked most of the boxes of the job description, he finally hasn't been appointed the job (Updegraff & Taylor, 2000). What the latter examples denote is that one's personality traits are subject to contextual changes due to situation-specific occurrences that affect one's understanding after an event had taken place, i.e. one who didn't get the job, or the emergence of unforeseen circumstances in one's life may give rise to social anxiety and/or phobia, or depressive behaviour. What it is meant is, psychological conditions usually take place due to cross-situational changes that alter the context in question, such as one who 'ticked all boxes of the job description' and presents oneself as open to new experiences, finally experiences closeness and faulty cognitive thinking, because he hasn't been appointed to this new post (Amodei & Nelson-Gray, 1991).

To elaborate more about personality trait changes, due to cross-situational variability, I could draw an example from the trait of conscientiousness. One, by not having been appointed to the desired post, due to contextual change that took place -i.e. the panel decided to offer the post to someone with less qualifications- may bring about changes to one's situation-specific variability of choices, such as instead of being efficient and organised to become easy-going and careless by thinking one is a failure (Church et al., 2008). Cross-situational changes influence the alteration of a trait by giving rise to negative cognitions, unhelpful emotions and avoidant behaviours (Oettingen, 2012). This sequence, the way it takes place explains what we have called before as 'behavioural signature'. Behavioural signature is about choices applied to personality due to contextual changes influencing one's choice of actions (Hallsworth et al., 2012).

Cognitive-behavioural therapy as a discipline can learn a lot from personality psychology in the understanding of trait changes the way these are altered due to context-specific situations (Davidson, 2008). What cognitive-behavioural therapy can learn is that cross-situational variability is influenced by situation-specific contextual changes; that is to say, from situational specificities subject to contextual changes that alter one's mode of thinking in view to the adoption of such changes (Sheldon et al., 1997; Church et al., 2008).

A new model in the teaching of cognitive-behavioural therapy taking into account personality contextual changes in the presence of cross-situational variables will be outlined in

this paper. This model will focus on how cross-situational variables influence contextual changes by introducing core beliefs and rules for living. Three parts will be considered in this new model:

1. Personality contextual changes and cognitive-behavioural therapy

Personality contextual changes explain changes in personality in reference to traits. Personality traits operate within contexts, which on one hand have to do with personality attributes, such as those of Big Five, and on the other with interpersonal, societal, and/or environmental changes which influence the way individuals see themselves in relation to others and the world (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008).

In cognitive-behavioural therapy, the individual is the one in question and not others, or the environment. Others and the environment play a secondary role in the influence of one's personality (Fenn & Byrne, 2013). That means, the way individuals see others and the world doesn't have to do with others or the world per se, but with one's faulty appraisals, comprehending external influences in the here and now, i.e. with one's faulty cognitions in considering others and the environment as decisive negative factors against one's own progress (Froggatt, 2009).

Teaching cognitive-behavioural therapy by taking into account personality contextual changes means that CBT can be taught in reference to personality attributes and traits the way these change or can change via one's contact with others and the world (Heller et al., 2009). In other words, cognitive-behavioural therapy should not start assessing individuals' negative understandings about themselves with regards to events -meaning that events should not be examined as precursors to negative appraisals- but in respect to changes that occur in given environments and influence changes in the trait context one operates, such as one having been conscientious, to become now indifferent and/or apathetic due to contextual changes taken place in one's life (Mancini & Roberto, 2009). To such an extent, one is considering faulty cognitions as outcomes of such influence, and not faulty cognitions as predisposing one's demeanour in coming to terms with changes in the environment (Hedaya & Quinn, 2008). To give an example of changes in the trait context one operates, we can refer to the attribute of neuroticism: individuals are presented with low mood, disordered behaviours, irritability, anxiety, because of changes in the environment, whereby suffering is introduced to one's life due to external factors (de Rosis et al., 2011; NICE 2011).

Faulty cognitions can affect one's understanding how others and the world behave or could behave against oneself due to one's failed interaction with them in the past (Wheeler et al., 2007). What it is meant by the latter is faulty appraisals can provide a further rise of negative thinking every time one comes in contact with others and the society (Freeston et al., 1996).

To try a diagram as to how teaching cognitive-behavioural therapy could appear by incorporating personality contextual changes, that could be as follows:

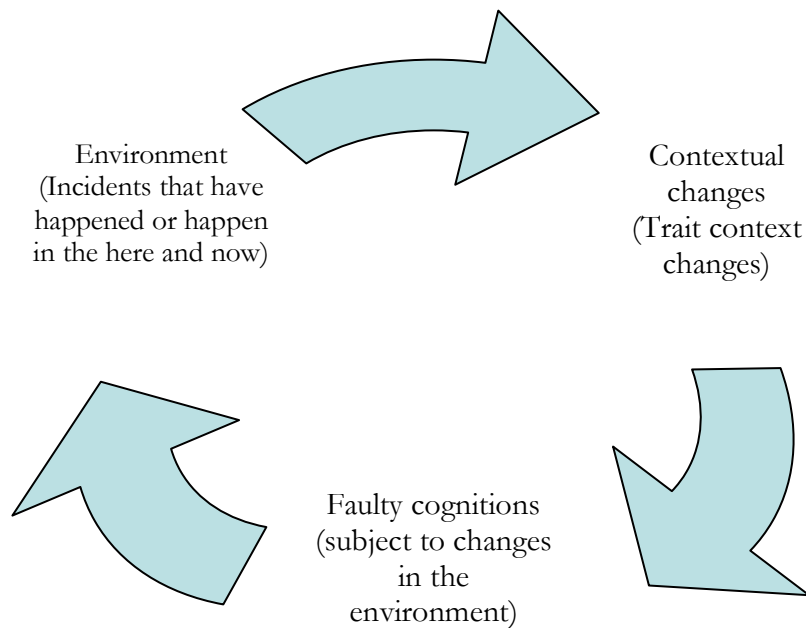


Figure 1: CBT and personality contextual changes

2. Cross-situational variables, contextual changes and choices of personality

Cross-situational variables refer to eventful occurrence of different incidents taking place at once, such as one who lost one's job and cannot pay mortgage installments, considers oneself incapable to financially support one's family (Lin et al., 2014). The interplay of adverse events affects one's personality contextually whereby personality traits operate differently compared to how they used to function before the occurrence of events (Löckenhoff et al., 2009). In this way, choices decided by one's personality have to do with behaviours that are avoidant because of contextual changes which have altered one's choices of actions, such as in the case of avoidant personality disorder (Sanislow et al., 2012).

In teaching cognitive-behavioural therapy, according to such an understanding, regarding cross-situational variables, provides a clearer approach not only in reference to how trait changes took place and how these are demonstrated in the here and now, but how such changes can be formulated (Westbrook et al., 2001). The latter indicates that the client by choosing avoidance cultivates rise of further negative consequences as by-products of contextual changes (Wells et al., 1995). To give an example of such consequences, we could consider the avoidant behaviour of not communicating with other people -contextual change-, the consequence of which might be one staying mostly at home -negative consequence further triggering this avoidant behaviour.

In teaching cognitive-behavioural therapy, cross-situational changes should also be pointed out in a sense of the needs aren't met with reference to what took place in one's life (Swendsen, 1998). In this way, cognitive-behavioural therapy would be able to address the importance of eventful occurrences as preceding factors introducing faulty cognitions in terms of personality traits attributions (Hedaya & Quinn, 2008). In such a respect, cognitive-behavioural therapy could be regarded as interested in what happens, and how that affects the inception and maintenance of faulty cognitive thinking, and not solely looking at one's interpretations of events the way one feels stigmatised by them (Rector, 2010).

To try another diagram, as to the teaching of cognitive-behavioural therapy by taking into account cross-situational variables, that could be presented as follows:

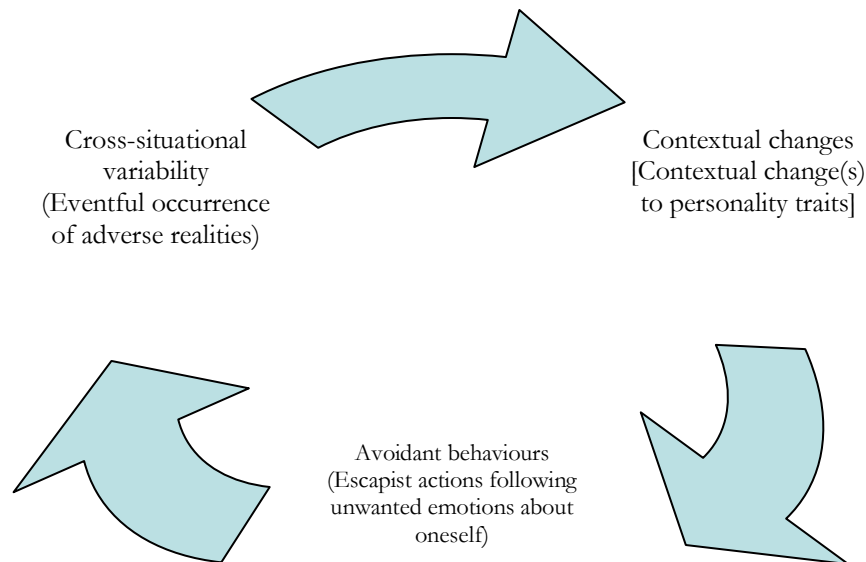


Figure 2: CBT and cross-situational variables

3. Cross-situational variables, core beliefs and rules for living

The eventful occurrence of cross-situational realities, when they take place, introduces core beliefs and rules for living (Neenan & Dryden, 2004). By 'core beliefs' in cognitive-behavioural therapy are meant chief faulty cognitions out of which all negative thinking derives, such as 'I'm a failure', 'nobody wants me', 'I'm not good enough', etc. (Beck, 2011); by 'rules for living' are meant assumptions upon which one's life has been built, and is being lived, such as 'if I go to the next interview I will fail again', 'my life will never change', 'I won't be able to do things to be proud of', etc. (Wenzel, 2012).

In teaching cognitive-behavioural therapy what needs to be taken into consideration is that core beliefs and rules for living have to be regarded as related to contextual changes of personality traits, such as one being closed to oneself more and not open to new experiences, or new efforts to be attempted, or that one who had stopped being conscientious has become now non-caring (Padesky, 1994). In this way, cognitive-behavioural therapy could be better associated to changes that happen in the environment and influence one's cognitions with respect to the here and now of cross-situational reality and how that has affected one's personality traits.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy what could demonstrate in such an understanding is that interventions to take place should bring about changes that can alter all three personality domains (cognitive, emotional, behavioural) in which core beliefs and rules for living exist and influence one's personality traits (Kihlstrom, 2013). Changes will refer to personality traits, in association to cross-situational variables, that have disengaged one because of contextual changes in the here and now, such as instead one looking for a job that is difficult to be found, one could look for a job that though may not meet one's aspirations, could nevertheless be able pay the bills. In that manner, teaching cognitive-behavioural therapy can provide students and practitioners of this approach with the understanding that by replacing unwanted realities with pragmatic ones, one's needs could be met in the here and now (Herbert et al., 2010).

In such an extent, personality traits will be able to help individuals to be more committed in what they are doing, as well as core beliefs and rules for living could be replaced by constructive ideas regarding useful choices (Dweck, 2008). To give an example, one may be a good mathematician, but because posts are limited in his/her discipline, he/she has chosen to become a physics teacher instead. In one's understanding of mathematics, physics could look as less engaging to work with, but now due to that new reality one discovers the use of mathematics in physics exhibiting thus extensive knowledge in both fields.

A diagram as to teaching cognitive-behavioural therapy in terms of how cross-situational realities can introduce core beliefs and rules for living could appear as follows:

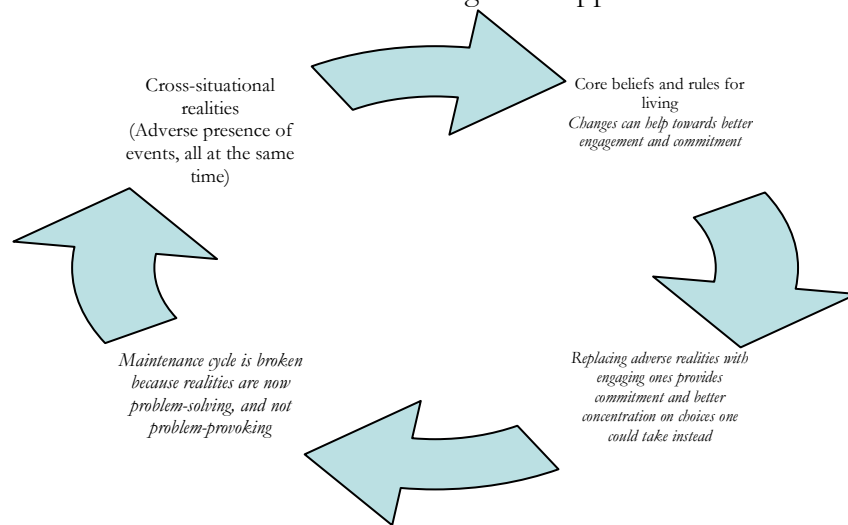


Figure 3: CBT and cross-situational reality

In view to what has been presented and discussed in the relationship between cross-situational realities, personality traits and how they can affect cognitions, emotions and behaviours, a final diagram can emerge:

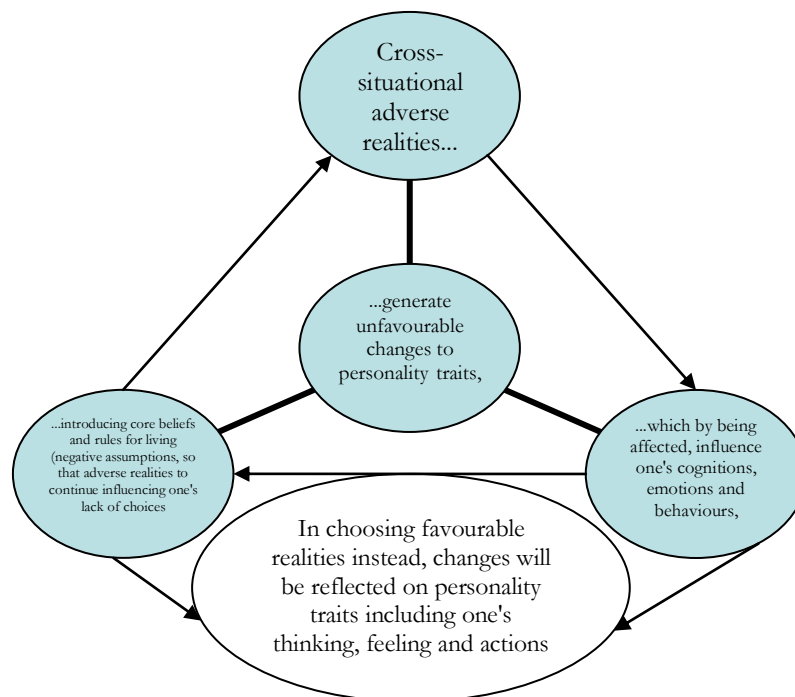


Figure 4: CBT, cross-situational reality and personality traits

The model I propose hasn't been validated because my attempt in this paper is to present it in its theoretical basis. This theoretical basis has been discussed in line with personality psychology, contingency issues and context-specificity perspectives. In order that model to be validated there needs to be devised a questionnaire which on one hand will be construed of items which will address cognitive and behavioural perspectives through Socratic questioning, i.e. items that will be demonstrated via open statements, so that participants to provide responses best to

their understanding; on the other, this model will be validated via employing cognitive-behavioural perspectives in line with personality traits statements, i.e. statements which will be relevant to the aspects of agreeableness, conscientiousness and the rest of Big-Five ones. The reason for such validation will be to seek links between personality psychology and cognitive-behavioural methodology from an empirical point of view, so that behavioural traits addressing personality aspects to be considered under cognitive premises triggered by everyday experiences.

This new model I have introduced is going to be validated through an empirical research which will test personality traits according to cognitive and behavioural functionality set by context and contingency specific experiences. The way I have introduced this model in the present theoretical paper seeks to set the foundations for future scientific endeavours regarding personality research and cognitive-behavioural therapy. Personality research will be based on cognitive and behavioural interpretations of human traits the way these appear in context-specific events triggered by early experiences and critical incidents' contingencies in the here and now.

Real-life examples as how this model could be used in contemporary research could refer to the clinical use of cognitive and behavioural perspectives regarding psychopathological conditions, such as personality disorders, where personality traits are mostly affected. An example is borderline personality disorder (BPD), where traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness are influenced by issues of assumed suspiciousness following traumatic events and/or recollection of them in the here-and-now. The reason for employing this model clinically is because of its importance in dealing with typical and atypical symptoms of psychopathology which are present during and after the onset of cognitive distortions. An example to make the latter statement clearer is the distortion of generalization whereby an individual considers that something taking place in one's life will always be taking place in one's life, always affecting and never (!?) introducing changes for the better.

Concluding remarks

In employing personality psychology, I have discussed how teaching cognitive-behavioural therapy could be better considered in terms of cross-situational reality and change of trait context. I have explained that what happens in life, whether foreseen, unforeseen, or in interplay with other occurrences, does provide changes in personality characteristics that affect one's presentation of oneself in terms of cognitions, emotions and behaviours. Cognitive-behavioural therapy mainly argues that core beliefs and rules for living generate changes in the way people think about others and the environment, without explaining that changes in the environment may be those which actually generate faulty cognitions and what results from them. In this paper, I have presented a new model in the teaching of cognitive-behavioural therapy where I have explored that changes in the environment are the main precursors of core beliefs and rules for living, for they are influenced by changes primarily affecting personality traits following adverse experience of current realities. To such an understanding, this model has been presented followed by relevant diagrams. My discussion of this new model was completed by the suggestion that replacing adverse realities with more pragmatic ones, may positively affect personality traits and one's cognitive, emotional and behavioural stances. Positive changes will become evident through the change of core beliefs and rules for living. That means that once cross-situational realities become more engaging and constructive -so individuals to make choices based on them- individuals will become more engaging and committed in view to cognitive, emotional and behavioural choices decided upon. What lies now is this model to be explored practically in terms of how theoretical changes to it advance the topic of cognitive-behavioural therapy with relevance to personality traits and how that could be possible to be examined in a study which empirically will test it. My next objective, therefore, would be to examine this model in practical terms through a research able to demonstrate it.

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