Dear Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to offer you my evaluation of Ekaterina Osavoliuk’s Ph.D. thesis on the topic of “Person’s cognitive flexibility in different types of self-relation,” submitted for the purpose of obtaining Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology.

The present thesis is based on a mixed method set of quantitative and qualitative studies examining how self-views (or self-relations) are associated with cognitive flexibility and further zeroing in on the psychometric properties of the construct of cognitive flexibility in the Russian cultural context. The prospective candidate found a range of latent profiles associated with cognitive flexibility, shedding new more nuanced look on the psychological structure of cognitive flexibility from an individual difference perspective. Further, studies revealed a range of associations with the used cognitive flexibility instrument, outlining convergent validity of the measure.

The conclusions from the thesis contribute to the burgeoning area of research on cognitive flexibility, situating it in a new cultural context (most past work has been based on Western samples). It is also refreshing to see a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and the use of latent profile analyses on top of standard approaches (mis)used in psychology, such as alphas or confirmatory factor analyses. Finally, I found the theoretical synthesis of approaches from cognitive and personality psychology insightful.

The Russian portion of the thesis appears well-written, and inferences drawn from the thesis comply with typical assessment strategies in personality psychology. I also appreciate a well-powered sample size, which helps to draw robust inferences about the estimates observed in the thesis. I also appreciated attention to the “jingle-jangle” confusion how cognitive flexibility has been defined (and measured) in the past.

At the same time, I am afraid I found the English portion of the thesis unreadable. It includes a range of Russian-based neologisms (e.g., “Processuality” is not a word in English). The English language summary requires both careful proofreading and restructuring of the sentences – Ideally the prospective candidate would get help from a professional translator to help not merely translate words, but also adjust the sentence structure to make it more accessible and comprehensible for an English-language reader. I am sympathetic to the challenges of translating Russian academic jargon and scientific narrative style into its English-language counterpart, but without it I am
afraid the English language portion of the dissertation is not in a satisfactory shape and requires some grammatical and linguistic rewriting to make it more accessible.

I also have a few quibbles about distinctiveness of the concept of cognitive flexibility and related phenomena. For instance, consider concepts of cognitive reappraisal in emotion regulation research, wise reasoning in wisdom science, executive functioning in self-regulation work, as well as generally work on meta-cognition. What are the convergence points and differences? You only briefly touch on connection to creativity (another complex and loosely defined construct), but what about other concepts in clinical, social/personality and cognitive psychology?

Another major point concerns the use of the term “process” in the present dissertation. The prospective candidate makes a big deal out of emphasizing the process nature of the construct. At the same time, I see little empirical attention to the study of the in-vivo process. Typically, the latter would require examining how people would make decisions, evaluating steps of flexible switching between task demands and/or adjusting strategies to the task goals. Unless I am mistaken, the present approach is quite different from this setup and hence elaboration on what the author means by the process and how it is a different level of analysis from what would be expected in cognitive and social psychology would be an important addition to the dissertation write-up.

At this moment, I am not sure if these are minor points that can be addressed during the defense presentation and may chiefly benefit from further additions in future research of the candidate. I think the clarification of the English language summary requires some revisions to the current text. At this point, I leave it to the discretion of the doctoral supervisor to decide whether more substantive changes would be required for the present dissertation text (also see critical minor points I would like to raise in the defense below).

Comments on the thesis

1) The notion of personal capability, as the prospective candidate describes in their manuscript, appears to confuse two parts: competence or skill and disposition. In cognitive science and educational / personality psychology, these are distinct processes, and I would like to see greater clarity to these points. For a broader point, see recent paper on metacognition (of which cognitive flexibility is arguably a part of) by Kuhn (2021): https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2021.1988603

Or see the discussion of dispositional vs. state features of cognitive flexibility when discussing the broader range of (wisdom-related) meta-cognitions in the work I was involved in, Grossmann et al., (2020): https://doi.org/10.1080/047840X.2020.1750917

In short, is cognitive flexibility a disposition, a skill, a state and if its more than one - what is the relationship between these distinct levels of analysis?
2) Do you think your results would look different if you used situation-specific behavioral markers of cognitive flexibility and self-control (akin to tasks used for executive functioning, task switching, and so on) rather than self-report questionnaires? As you talk a lot about the value of a progress-oriented approach (which I fully agree with, see Grossmann, 2017, Perspectives on Psychological Science), I was wondering what processes did you study? To my limited understanding, processes require context, and I see rather little focus on context in the present dissertation. Instead, I see a lot about how people understand the concept of cognitive flexibility, and how they self-identify characteristics theoretically related to cognitive flexibility. But possibly less about the actual way cognitive flexibility manifests itself.

3) There is a great deal of interpretation for the latent classes identified in the dissertation. What is the support for this interpretation of what these classes mean? Can you provide empirical data (e.g., by examining classification into specific classes and performance on additional tasks/measures)?

4) The observation of a negative relationship between control and context sensitivity aspects of the cognitive flexibility scale is noteworthy, because it connects to the work on primary vs. secondary control the self-control literature. For instance, see Heckhausen’s work (1997 and many follow-up studies): https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.33.1.176. Building on this and similar frameworks, would it be reasonable to explain the observed negative association by broadening what you mean by ”control?” That is, one can exert psychological control by changing the situation via adjusting one’s behavior to it or one can exert control by changing the situation itself. Obviously, the latter strategy is not always possible, and hence calling only this second strategy as “control” may be a misnomer. As a sidenote, the differences in such control exist not only across age groups in Western samples, but also when examining groups from different cultures and hence it would be useful to examine this framework in the Russian context.

5) You spend a lot of time examining inter-individual profiles and associations. Yet, cognitive flexibility likely manifests “flexibly” within the same person across situations (see my work within the wise reasoning framework, Grossmann, Gerlach, & Denissen, 2016, but also works of others on intra-individual differences). If you were to take the ideographic approach to your research, would you expect a similar set of results (re: associations and profiles you identified)? Would the construct of cognitive flexibility you identified - with two components look similar when examining variability in expression of relevant characteristics “within” the sample person over time? I would love to see a mature discussion on this topic.
More broadly, I would like you to take a position on how your conceptualization of cognitive flexibility resonates with the modern personality approaches such as the Whole Trait Theory advances by Fleeson and colleagues, whereas psychological traits are intra-individual profiles of states.

Despite these critical limitations, the dissertation by Ekaterina Osavoliuk makes an important advancement of research on cognitive flexibility at the intersection of research on cognition and personality. Assuming the major weaknesses can be corrected in a final revision (by rewriting the English language summary to make it more comprehensible) and the presentation, it would meet the criteria set up by the HSE, the dissertation would meet the requirements for work for the degree of a Doctor of Philosophy.

Sincerely,

Igor Grossmann, Ph.D.
IgorGrossmann.com

Director, Wisdom and Culture Laboratory
Associate Editor, Social Psychological and Personality Science
Co-host of the On Wisdom Podcast

Associate Professor of Psychology
University of Waterloo, Canada

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