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Personality Psychology
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Introduction

The field of personality psychology is flourishing. In many respects the current aspects of the field reflects important shifts, both methodological and conceptual, that have occurred over the past two decades. Some of these changes arose in response to conceptual crises within the field, particularly the Great Trait Debate that occupied much of the field in the seventies. Other shifts reflect the gradual maturing of intellectual agendas that were present at the modern inception of academic personality psychology in the nineteen thirties (Craik, 1986).

Personality Psychology

Personality psychology is the scientific discipline that studies the personality system. The discipline seeks to understand a person's major psychological patterns and how those patterns are expressed in an individual's life. Personality psychologists conduct scientific research on personality, teach about personality (usually at the college and university level) and participate in the broader discipline of psychology (Phares, 1991).

Personality psychology studies how psychological systems work together. The field can act as a unifying resource for the broader discipline of psychology. Yet, personality's current field-wide organization promotes a fragmented view of the person, seen through such competing theories as the psychodynamic, trait, and humanistic (Pervin, 2003).

Unlike some of the others areas of psychology, personality psychology has no single accepted theoretical framework (Burger, 1993). There is, of course, a consensus within the field about the important questions (that's what makes it a field in the first

place), but the kinds of answers that satisfy one personality researcher can, and often do, differ radically from the kinds of answers that satisfy another. Why is this? One reason may be that the goal of personality psychology, to make sense of the whole person, is inherently controversial (Burger, 2000).

Personality psychologists strive to understand the impact that one person can have on others in the social environment. Although it is a concern that personality psychologists and lay observers both share, the more evaluative connotations of personality are largely absent from the scientific study of personality. In the scientific approach, there is much less interest in what constitutes a "good" or "bad" personality. Although every personality psychologist knows very well, in her or her private life, which personalities are "good" and "bad," and although he or she might work very hard to ensure that others regard him or her as having a "good" personality, each will strive to leave these issues at the door when he or she enters the laboratory to undertake research on personality. To do otherwise would be like a chemist judging one atom to be "good" and another "bad" or a physicist judging gravitational forces to be "good" while electrical forces to be "bad." (Pervin, 2003)

What is Personality?

What is personality? How do we know personality when we see it? How do we distinguish one personality from another? These are reasonable questions, but it may help to start with a slightly different one: What is personality *not*? To begin with, personality is not something you can point your finger at. You can't see it, touch it, or smell it. Few of us doubt, however, that personality exists. In fact, there is general agreement that all people have a personality. We perceive others to have personality based on their behavior

in the situations in which we observe them. When we see a child sharing her candy with her brother, we often conclude that she is a nice person. Based on this assumption, we may expect that she will be likely to act nicely towards others in the future (Burger, 2000).

We also use information about the situation to make this type of judgment. For instance, we might not assume that the little girl is a nice person if we hear her mother tell her she can't go to a movie unless she shares her candy. This example highlights that two distinct factors influence behavior: our personality and the situations in which we find ourselves. Personality psychologists focus on the role personality processes play in guiding our actions, but they use knowledge of the situation to infer when personality processes are operating (Burger, 2000).

Researchers and theorists have argued for centuries about the nature of personality. One ancient Greek theorist, Hippocrates, hypothesized that personality is the result of four bodily humors (or fluids), and that an overabundance of one type of humor leads to a particular personality. Following in this tradition, more modern researchers have identified other biological processes that influence personality. Other researchers believe the origins of personality reside in deep rooted psychological conflicts or prior learning experiences. The diversity of these theoretical perspectives is one of the things that make personality psychology such a rich and interesting area of study (Hogan & Johnson, 1997).

The Study of Personality

There are a number of different techniques that are used in the study of personality. Each technique has its own strengths and weaknesses.

Experimental methods are those in which the researcher controls and manipulates the variables of interests and takes measures of the results. This is the most scientific form of research, but experimental research can be difficult when studying

aspects of personality such as motivations, emotions, and drives. These ideas are internal, abstract, and extremely difficult to measure (Funder, 2001).

Case studies and self-report methods rely on in-depth analysis of an individual as well as information provided by the individual. Case studies rely heavily on the interpretation of the observer, while self-report methods depend upon the memory of the individual of interest. Because of this, these methods tend to be highly subjective and it is difficult to generalize the findings to a larger population (Funder, 2001).

Clinical research relies upon information gathered from clinical patients over the course of treatment. Many personality theories are based upon this type of research, but because the research subjects are unique and exhibit abnormal behavior, this research tends to be highly subjective and difficult to generalize (Funder, 2001).

Theory and Method in the Study of Personality

In the 20th century, two very different perspectives have been taken on the study of personality. The psychodynamic tradition has been characterized by an emphasis on intensive observation of human behavior in clinical settings as the basis for developing and modifying theories, with little focus on defining theories in a manner that allows them to be dis-proven based on contrary evidence. On the other hand, the tradition of personality research has attempted to present theories which can be supported or dis-proven scientifically (Schultz & Schultz, 1994). In both cases, the usefulness of a theory in advancing knowledge about personality depends on the relationship between the theory and the method in which it was derived. For instance, a theory built and modified

almost exclusively based on intensive observation of human behavior may have more relevance to actual personality functioning than a theory which was derived in part based on defining terms that can be conveniently tested. On the other hand, it may be that methods emphasizing testability allow for a more self-correcting process of developing knowledge. In fact, the history of personality research has been characterized by self-criticism and dramatic shifts in methodology as it has attempted to correct for limitations in earlier perspectives (Gilman, 1992).

Grand Theories of Personality

The behavioral perspective suggests that the keys to understanding development are observable behavior and outside stimuli in the environment. If we know the stimuli, we can predict the behavior. Behavioral theories reject the notion that individuals universally pass through a series of stages. Instead, people are assumed to be affected by the environmental stimuli to which they happen to be exposed. Developmental patterns, then, are personal, reflecting a particular set of environmental stimuli, and development is the result of continuing exposure to specific factors in the environment (Feisty & Feisty, 2002).

John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner's theories of **classical and operant conditioning** hold that all behavior is learned as a response to external stimuli. Classical conditioning occurs when an organism learns to respond in a particular way to a neutral stimulus that normally does not evoke that type of response. For example, Russian psychologist Ivan Pavlov found that if a dog is repeatedly exposed to the pairing of two stimuli, such as the sound of a bell and the presentation of meat, it may learn to react to

the sound of the bell alone in the same way it reacts to the presentation of meat. In operant conditioning, Skinner demonstrated that individuals learn to act deliberately on their environments in order to bring about desired consequences. Reinforcement is the process by which a stimulus is provided that increases the probability that a preceding behavior will be repeated. In addition, punishment will decrease the probability that the preceding behavior will occur in the future (Mischel, 1993).

According to **social-cognitive learning theorist** Albert Bandura, when we see the behavior of a model being rewarded, we are likely to imitate that behavior. Behavior is learned through observation and imitation, not conditioning through reinforcement or punishment (Mischel, 1993).

The cognitive perspective focuses on the processes that allow people to know, understand and think about the world. The cognitive perspective emphasizes how people internally represent and think about the world. There are two major theories:

No single person has had a greater impact on the study of cognitive development than **Jean Piaget**. He proposed that all people pass in a fixed sequence through a series of universal stages of cognitive development. In each stage, he suggested that not only did the quantity of information increase, but so did the quality of knowledge and understanding. Piaget suggests that the growth in children's understanding of the world can be explained by two basic principles. **Assimilation** is the process in which people understand an experience in terms of their current state of cognitive development and way of thinking. In contrast, **accommodation** refers to changes in existing ways of thinking in response to encounters with new stimuli or events (Feist & Feist, 2002).

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky's **sociocultural theory** proposes that a full understanding of development is impossible without taking into account the culture in which children develop. Sociocultural theory proposes that children's understanding of the world is acquired through their problem-solving interactions with adults and other children. As children play and cooperate with others, they learn what is important in their society, and at the same time, advance cognitively in their understanding of the world (Feist & Feist, 2002).

The humanistic perspective contends that people have a natural tendency to make decisions about their lives and control their behavior. The humanistic perspective emphasizes free will, the ability of humans to make choices and come to decisions about their lives (Erikson, 1987).

Carl Rogers suggested that all people have a need for positive regard that results from an underlying wish to be loved and respected. Because it is other people who provide this positive regard, we become dependent on them. Consequently, our view of ourselves and our self-worth is a reflection of how we think others view us (Boeree, 1997).

Abraham Maslow suggests that self-actualization is a primary goal in life. Self-actualization is a state of self-fulfillment in which people achieve their highest potential in their own unique way (Boeree, 1997).

The Evolutionary Theory stresses that behavior is strongly influenced by biology, is tied to evolution, and is characterized by critical or sensitive periods (Malone, 1990)).

Evolutionary approaches grow out of the groundbreaking work of Charles Darwin. The evolutionary perspective is also referred to as Ethological or Biological (Feist & Feist, 2002).

Konrad Lorenz discovered that newborn geese are genetically preprogrammed to become attached to the first moving object they see after birth. His work, which demonstrated the importance of biological determinants in influencing behavior patterns, ultimately led developmentalists to consider the ways in which human behavior might reflect inborn genetic patterns (Feist & Feist, 2002).

The evolutionary perspective encompasses one of the fastest growing areas within the field of lifespan development, **behavioral genetics**. Behavioral genetics studies the effects of heredity and genetics on behavior. As technology improves, and researchers continue to map the human genome, there is an increasing understanding of the role and function of the genetic codes and their influence on development (Malone, 1990).

Advocates of the psychodynamic perspective believe that behavior is motivated by inner forces, memories and conflicts that are generally beyond people's awareness and control. There are 2 major theories:

Freud's psychoanalytic theory suggests that unconscious forces act to determine personality and behavior. To Freud, the unconscious is a part of the personality about which a person is unaware. It contains infantile wishes, desires, demands and needs that are hidden, because of their disturbing nature, from conscious awareness. Freud suggested that the unconscious is responsible for a good part of our everyday behavior.

According to Freud, one's personality has three aspects: the id, the ego and the superego (Boeree, 1997).

Erikson's psychosocial theory suggests that developmental change occurs throughout our lives in eight distinct stages. The stages emerge in a fixed pattern and are similar for all people. Erikson argues that each stage presents a crisis or conflict that the individual must resolve. Although no crisis is ever fully resolved, making life increasingly complicated, the individual must at least address the crisis of each stage sufficiently to deal with demands made during the next stage of development (Erikson, 1987).

Personality Types A & B

Two personality types were developed by the psychological profession in order to define people's behaviors. Each of these two types has a set of criteria by which those who belong to one type or the other are discovered. These types are type A, the strict and rigid, perfectionist type, and type B, the relaxed individual's personality type. The type A personality is a very flat personality, very strict (Burger, 2000). Fundamentally this personality grows out of having had to earn acceptance rather than being bestowed with it unconditionally. This person as a child was probably given conditional love had a role model who was raised on conditional love or both. There was a standard to be met and if it was met there was acceptance and reward; if the standard wasn't met then there was neither reward nor acceptance (Funder, 2001).

There is not much said about type B personality except that it is the opposite of type A. Those that are type B are said to be laid back and easy going.

Personality and Culture

In the eighteenth century, philosophers dealt with questions of “National Character.” In the 20th century, anthropologists embraced the concept of National character. In the 1920’s and 30’s, ideas on personality and culture began to be discussed (Levine, 2001), and during and after World War II the U.S. government called upon anthropologists to help understand the psyche of its enemy nations , including Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union. An anthropological definition of national character was: “Relatively enduring personality characteristics and patterns that are modal among the adult members of the society” (Inkles & Levinson, 1969). Culture and personality (or personality and culture) became classic names for psychological anthropology.

Our behavior is often a result of our personality. Culture influences that personality. Cultural beliefs and practices shape our ways of parenting and social upbringing which has an effect on the character we mold into as we age (Carver & Scheir, 2000).

Psychologists have traditionally recognized two different types of cultures, collectivists and individualists. People from collectivist cultures such as Asia, Africa, and South America tend to see themselves in terms of others, while those from individualistic backgrounds such as North America and Western Europe see themselves as unique from others. This broad dichotomy has lead to an interest in varieties between cultures (Trafimow, Trandis, & Goto, 1991).

Culture affects a wide range of personality factors. How we see one another is an influence of cultural backgrounds (Ingles & Levinson, 1969).

Personality Disorders

Personality disorders are a group of mental disturbances defined by the fourth (1994) edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* as "enduring pattern[s] of inner experience and behavior" that are sufficiently rigid and deep-seated to bring a person into repeated conflicts with his or her social and occupational environment. *DSM-IV* specifies that these dysfunctional patterns must be regarded as non-conforming or deviant by the person's culture, and cause significant emotional pain and/or difficulties in relationships and occupational performance. In addition, the patient usually sees the disorder as being consistent with his or her self image (ego-syntonic) and may blame others.

Personality disorders can greatly affect a person's life. Having a personality disorder can negatively affect one's work, one's family, and one's social life. Personality disorders exist on a continuum so they can be mild to more severe in terms of how pervasive and to what extent a person exhibits the features of a particular personality disorder. While most people can live pretty normal lives with mild personality disorders (or more simply, personality traits), during times of increased stress or external pressures (work, family, a new relationship, etc.), the symptoms of the personality disorder will gain strength and begin to seriously interfere with their emotional and psychological functioning (Gunderson, 1998).

Personality disorders have their onset in late adolescence or early adulthood. Doctors rarely give a diagnosis of personality disorder to children on the grounds that children's personalities are still in the process of formation and may change considerably by the time they are in their late teens. But, in retrospect, many individuals with personality disorders could be judged to have shown evidence of the problems in childhood (Oldham & Skodol, 2000).

There are as many potential causes of personality disorders as there are people who suffer from them. They may be caused by a combination of parental upbringing, one's personality and social development, as well as genetic and biological factors. Research has not narrowed down the cause to any factor at this time. We do know, however, that these disorders will most often manifest themselves during increased times of stress and interpersonal difficulties in one's life. Therefore, treatment most often focuses on increasing one's coping mechanisms and interpersonal skills (Gunderson, 1998).

By contrast, *DSM-IV* classifies personality disorders into three clusters based on symptom similarities:

Cluster A: Paranoid personality disorder may appear as a prodrome to delusional disorder or frank schizophrenia. These individuals are at risk for agoraphobia, major depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and substance abuse. Individuals with schizoid personality disorder may develop major depression. Patients with schizotypal personality disorder may develop brief psychotic disorder, schizophreniform disorder, or

delusional disorder. At the time of diagnosis, 30-50% have concurrent major depression, and most have a history of at least one major depressive episode.

Cluster B: Antisocial personality disorder is associated with a risk for anxiety disorders, substance abuse, somatization disorder, and pathological gambling. Borderline personality disorder is associated with a risk for substance abuse, eating disorders (particularly bulimia), and posttraumatic stress disorder. Suicide is a particular risk in borderline patients. Histrionic personality disorder is associated particularly with somatoform disorders. People with narcissistic personality disorder are at risk for anorexia nervosa and substance abuse as well as experiencing depression.

Cluster C: Avoidant personality disorder is associated with anxiety disorders (especially social phobia). Dependent personality disorder carries a risk for anxiety disorders and adjustment disorder. People with obsessive-compulsive personality disorder may be at risk for myocardial infarction because of their common type A lifestyles. They may also be at risk for anxiety disorders. Notably, they are probably not at increased risk for obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The *DSM-IV* clustering system does not mean that all patients can be fitted neatly into one of the three clusters. It is possible for patients to have symptoms of more than one personality disorder or to have symptoms from different clusters.

The prognosis for recovery depends in part on the specific disorder. Although some patients improve as they grow older and have positive experiences in life, personality disorders are generally life-long disturbances with periods of worsening

(exacerbations) and periods of improvement (remissions). Others, particularly schizoid patients, have better prognoses if they are given appropriate treatment. Patients with paranoid personality disorder are at some risk for developing delusional disorders or schizophrenia. The personality disorders with the poorest prognoses are the antisocial and the borderline. Borderline patients are at high risk for developing substance abuse disorders or bulimia. About 80% of hospitalized borderline patients attempt suicide at some point during treatment, and about 5% succeed in committing suicide (Gunderson, 1998).

Conclusion

There is relative agreement that the term *personality* refers to a person's characteristics, emotional responses, thoughts, and behaviors that are relatively stable over time and across circumstances. *Psychodynamic* theorists, beginning with Freud, have proposed that unconscious forces influence behavior (Burger, 1993). Freud developed a topographical model of the mind in which there are three levels of mental awareness: *conscious*, *preconscious*, and *unconscious*. Freud described how thinking and behavior develop in five psychosexual stages (*oral*, *anal*, *phallic*, *latency*, *genital*) based on children's interactions with their parents. Finally, he proposed a structural model of personality in which three dynamic processes (*id*, *ego*, *superego*) struggle to meet basic needs in the context of interaction with the social environment. Despite the many criticisms of Freudian theory, it served as a springboard for much of the theorizing and research of the past century (Engler, 1995).

The scientific study of personality as a focus within the larger field of psychology must begin with a definition of the term itself. The origin of the term lies in the Latin word, *persona*, generally understood as the mask that people wear in dealing with others as they play various roles in life (Phares, 1991). Although there are various definitions psychologists use for the term personality, a consensus definition involves recognition that we are concerned with studying a pattern of a number of human tendencies, including traits, dispositions, unconscious dynamics, learned coping strategies, habitual and spontaneous affective responses, goal-directedness, information-processing style, and genetic and biological factors that give some degree of consistency to human behavior. Very important in this approach to understanding personality are the notions of both a pattern of characteristics and the relatively consistent nature of their occurrence. Personality theory is not greatly concerned with a unique occurrence of a particular behavior, but rather the consistent pattern of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions and their overlapping and unique manifestations in individuals (Engler, 1995).

At this point in the development of a science of personality, there is no general agreement on all the factors which contribute to, and make up human personality. There is not even general agreement over which aspects to study or exactly how to study them. Nevertheless, the field of personality theory and research is exceedingly rich and varied. However, we must approach this richness by understanding the approaches of various theories and their particular focus (Carver & Scheier, 2000).

Within the social and behavioral sciences, personality psychologists have chosen to specialize in comprehensiveness (Little, 1972). As an intellectual field its scope of

inquiry is inordinately extensive. Personality psychology seeks to integrate diverse influences on human conduct ranging from the genetic and neurophysiological underpinnings of traits to the historical contexts within which individual life stories can be rendered coherent. Pervin (2003) has provided a thoughtful definition of personality which, in part, characterizes it as "the complex organization of cognitions, affects, and behaviors that gives direction and pattern (coherence) to the person's life." The study of personality seeks to understand how individuals are like all other people, some other people, and no other person (Little, 1972). It formulates theories about the nature of human nature, the role of individual differences, and the study of single cases. Personality psychology provides one of the core basic sciences underlying many of the fields of applied psychology, including clinical, counseling, health, and organizational psychology.

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