Personality Theories: An Introduction

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I want to thank Dr. Boeree for allowing me to use his On-line text in this class and for his permission to use that text in the creation of this – at cost – manuscript for students in face to face classes. I have avoided the temptation to add or delete anything from his material. Instead, if necessary, each chapter will include an introduction by me followed by Dr. Boeree’s material straight off the internet. Dr. Boeree is continually updating his material. Unfortunately that means my copy will be outdated the day it is published. For any student interested in the newest information I strongly recommend accessing Dr. Boeree’s web site at http://webspace.ship.edu/cgboer/perscontents.html.

This text is not the only material you will need for successful completion of this course. I will also have online power point presentations, puzzles and quizzes as part of this class. Be sure to log into a computer and access your electronic material each week while taking this course.

So, where to begin when studying personality? There are three possible approaches. Many students like discussing the ten distinct personality pathologies listed in the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) describing their symptoms or etiologies. Who doesn’t appreciate the intricacies of the Obsessive Compulsive or the Hedonistic personality disorders? Other students like to study what it means to have a personality. What makes up the individual pieces of our personalities? Or we can study the theories that attempt to define what shapes personality. This course is called personality theories because we will concentrate on the vast number of competing theories that attempt to describe how personality is shaped. However, we need a short introduction to the pathologies in personality and a short list of what makes up personality to appreciate the information in the rest of the course.

So then, what is personality? How do we define it? Psychology has nothing as precise as a mathematical formula like $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$. We are not able to define personality by combining elements, such as $H20 = Water$. Personality is an elusive beast. It is more like a painting which can be interpreted by each viewer differently. **Introspection**, evaluating how you feel, allows us to look inside of ourselves and anecdotally define our own specific personality. In doing so we recognize the attributes in us that create our individuality. At the same time those factors that give us individuality give us a method of comparing ourselves to others - connecting us to a wider world of similar people. Our personality also allows others to predict how we will act in specific situations. We can point to a person and say “she’s shy” or gregarious or extraverted or outgoing. Intrinsically we know when we are talking about a personality, but that’s not good enough for science. In science we need to catalogue and quantify. **Anecdotal** evidence is not sufficient.

**Personality** can be defined as the attributes which make us individuals, define our relationship with our environments, and give us consistency in our actions. To study
personality it would be useful to define the attributes that make up personality. Do psychologists know what those attributes are? Can we define them? Currently we can attribute personality to emotion, cognition, motivation, self concept and traits (or types). This list is fluid, changing with the outcomes of newer research, but it is a good place to start.

**Emotions** are the expressions of our limbic system. Some researchers believe there are over 500 different emotions. According to Ekman, the seven emotions that can be found in almost all cultures are fear, anger, sadness, joy, contempt, disgust and surprise. **Cognition** is the brain activity involved in perceiving, interpreting, judging and planning. Cognition defines our perception of other people and our social situation. **Motivation** can be defined as what compels us to act in specific ways. Motivation can be broken into motives and drives. **Drives** are our primary biological needs like hunger and thirst while **motives** are secondary learned incentives like pleasing our parents, our boss or our lover. Our **self concept** is our understanding of ourselves and includes **self efficacy** (our self worth or value and effectiveness). **Types** are made up of **traits** which are highly genetically programmed qualities that predict the way you will behave through a large number of different environments. As you can see in Table one, there are different competing ideas about the traits that define us and help predict our behavior.

**Table one: three examples of type and trait groups.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hippocrates’ four types</th>
<th>The Big Six traits</th>
<th>The MBTI model of traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Choleric</td>
<td>Extroversion</td>
<td>Extrovert – Introvert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanguine</td>
<td>Agreeable</td>
<td>Sensing – Intuitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phlegmatic</td>
<td>Conscientious</td>
<td>Thinking – Feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melancholy</td>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>Judging – Perceiving</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Openness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Honesty/ Humility</td>
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Hippocrates believed that each type included specific traits and a person could be included to a larger or smaller degree in each type. Hippocrates ideas are expressed today through the term temperament. **Temperament** refers to a consistent style of behavior and emotional reaction present from birth. Temperaments are assumed to be controlled by genetics. Many researchers discount the types, because they believe a type should be defined as an all or nothing inclusion. In that view a type completely describes you and there is no inclusion in any other type. Other researchers, like Hippocrates, believe your personality can include multiple qualities of various types.

Traits, a subset of types, are more precise classifications. They occur in graduated measurements and a single person will fall somewhere on the graduation in every trait. As an example, you can be very introverted or very extroverted or somewhere between the two extremes. The interplay of emotion, cognition, motivation, traits and self concept give us our personality and when these attributes become maladaptive we define personality disorders.
A personality disorder is defined as an enduring pattern of experience and behavior that differs greatly from the expectations of the individual’s culture. Which means that each culture defines what is or is not a pathology. The behavior produced by the individual should be rare, not tolerated by society and ineffective as a coping strategy. The behavior must be seen as rigid and be displayed across a variety of situations, leading to distress or problems in important areas of life. Also, the behavior must not be due to direct physiological effects of a substance or a general medical condition such as brain trauma. If a trait is maladaptive and inflexible and causes significant impairment or distress and not caused by a general medical condition then it is considered a sign of a personality disorder.

Ten personality psychopathologies are listed in the DSM IV in three distinct clusters:

The Eccentric Cluster includes: Paranoid, Schizoid and Schizotypal pathologies
The Erratic cluster includes: Histrionic, Antisocial, Borderline, and Narcissistic pathologies
The Anxious cluster includes: Avoidant, Dependant and Obsessive-Compulsive pathologies

Obsessive-compulsive is the most prevalent disorder while Narcissistic personality disorder is the least common.

Now that we know a little about what makes up personality and what we call the pathologies of personality, let’s change our focus to the theories that researchers use to describe the development and maintenance of personality. If we want to study personality we can do so nomothetically or idiographically. The nomothetic approach to studying personality tries to group and compare people. Nomothetic sounds like “normal” and you can use that to distinguish it from the idiographic approach. Those who use an idiographic approach to studying personality concentrate on an individual’s personality. Rather than finding common personalities, the idiographic approach emphasizes the “idiosyncratic” nature of a particular personality.

What is a theory and what is it not? For some people science and theories have bad reputations because of the evolution vs. creationism controversy. Science in itself is not good or bad anymore than a Ford is good or bad even though thousands of people are killed by a Ford every year. Science is simply a vehicle used to discover basic rules of the universe. How those rules are used or abused is the fault of mankind, not science.

Some might argue that mankind should not seek to know the rules of the universe. Not too long ago “learned” men even claimed that the basis of scientific inquiry, empiricism, was not an acceptable method of discovery. What could be observed was not necessarily accepted. As Stanovich points out in his book “How to think Straight about Psychology”;

Galileo saw the moons of Saturn in his telescope, but the best minds of the day refused to accept his observations. They claimed, in their most intelligent style, there were only 7 days in a week and 7 openings in the head so there were obviously never going to be any more than 7 items in the heaven. It did not matter what Galileo saw in his telescope. If objects can not be seen by the naked eye, then they did not exist!
Galileo might have been the first casualty of modern technology. He had an instrument that allowed him to see what others were unable and unwilling to see. Rather than use new techniques to observe the world, the “learned” men of old wanted to argue how strongly they held their beliefs. The person who had the strongest conviction in his ideas prevailed. If you did not accept that your strength of conviction was adequate to win the day, then your only option was to kill the person who had the stronger conviction, thus leaving your opinion the only available option. Many wars were started and many people died over unresolved struggles of conviction between fundamentalists.

Science is interested in what is testable and falsifiable. Belief, faith and strength of conviction are not used in scientific arguments. Science does not care how strongly a person cares about an issue. Science demands all things be put to a test. The theories of science, the predictions of how the universe works, must be precise enough to be falsifiable through testing and observation. A philosophy which has a response for any and every situation is not an acceptable scientific theory. Folk wisdoms and common sense explanations are philosophies, not theories. In many cases science has proven when, where and how folk wisdoms are true and false. When we know the universal rule we can describe it (H2O=water). When we do not know the rule we create theories to predict outcomes. Then we test the theory to determine if it does a good job of predicting those outcomes.

You can use either inductive and deductive reasoning to produce a theory. Inductive thinking takes one or a few specific observations and attempts to describe universal properties from those specific observations. Deductive reasoning looks at universal principles and attempts to find specific rules derived from those universal principles. Although we live by induction on a daily basis, deductive reasoning is accepted as more logical. We may observe that all over the world certain animals (finches) are very similar and yet they are just different enough to fit into their specific niches in the environment. So we deduce that based on an animal’s ability to survive, out compete and out produce its neighbors variations in traits within the community are passed on to the next generation and animals eventually change creating new subspecies. We create a theory called “the survival of the fittest”. This theory is a general proposition or relational statements that may be true or false. The theory is not tested directly; instead, hypotheses are created from the theory and the hypothesis are put to the test. Hypotheses are tentative hypothetical statements about how events are related to one another. They are stated as predictions so that testing can be done to verify or invalidate the hypothesis.

How do we judge if a theory is good or bad? When critics review theories they evaluate them on 6 criteria:

- **Comprehensiveness** - Do the theories encompass and account for a wide range and variety of phenomena?

- **Precision, consistency and testability** - Do the theories contain constructs and relational statements that are clearly and explicitly stated and measured? Is it consistent within itself using testable operational definitions? And is it falsifiable? If so, the theory can be tested.
• **Parsimony** - Are the theories as economical as possible, containing few assumptions, while still adequately accounting for the phenomena in their domain?

• **Heuristic value** - Do the theories challenge researchers; stimulating new ideas and new research?

• **Empirical validity** - Are the theories confirmed when the hypotheses of the theories are tested?

• **Applied value** - Do the theories provide creative solutions to problems that are of interest and concern to people in society? Is it a practical guide?

We shall use these criteria as we examine the theories of personality.

Now check in on Dr. Boeree and see how he begins our class.