

## Theories of Personality: Questions and Controversies

By

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Generating explanations for human behavior has been a pastime since the beginning of time. Theoretical systems evolve as people try to account for individual differences in behavior. Why do people behave the way they do? Why is there a wide variety of behavioral differences? Attempting to answer these questions has kept social and behavioral science busy, but clearly no definitive conclusion has been forthcoming. Each investigator offers a different perspective. Examining some of these different orientations, however, and analyzing how each has contributed to the complexity of this discipline provides a starting point for defining personality and for guiding an investigation of it.

### Defining Personality

Ryckman (1985) stated that despite the plethora of definitions, there is a basic agreement among theorists that personality is a *psychological construct*. That is, it is a complex abstraction that includes a person's unique history, genetic background, and the impact these have on the individual's response to the environment (p.5). Therefore, the study of personality is based on explaining individual differences that account for unique ways of responding to various situations. Adding a more detailed analysis, Leeper and Madison (1959) suggested the following: (1) personality is only a part of the whole life of the individual, rather than the sum total of psychological characteristics; (2) personality is a matter of how the person represents and deals with emotionally significant things; (3) personality is to some degree a matter of the development of emotional potentialities of a person; (4) personality is heavily influenced by interpersonal relations but is not fully explained by them (5) personality is not restricted to self-description (p. 30). The primary focus of psychology, then, is finding evidence to piece all of this together to explain how and why people respond the way they do to the environment.

Even though expounding on possible reasons for human behavior has occurred for centuries, psychology is a new science. Psychology emerged as an independent scientific discipline in Germany during the middle of the nineteenth century. It defined its task as the analysis of consciousness in the normal, adult human being. (Hall & Lindzey, 1970, p. 29). The goal of psychologists was to discover the basic elements of consciousness and to determine how these elements formed compounds. Describing psychology as "mental chemistry" makes sense when this analogy to elements and compounds is considered. However, no idea can surface without its critics.

Different camps began to argue the main function of the mind, or consciousness, has to do with its active processes rather than with its passive contents. Sensing, not sensations; thinking, not ideas; imagining, not images--these *actions* should be the

principal subject of psychology. Others argued the mind is not amenable to investigation because it is too private and subjective; they urged studying behavior to find answers (Hall & Lindzey, 1970, p. 29). Freud's attack came from yet another direction. He debated a study of the *unconscious* was needed to make sense of human behavior.

## Psychoanalytic Theories

### Sigmund Freud

Sigmund Freud was born in 1856 to Jewish parents in what is now Czechoslovakia. He became a medical doctor in 1883 but never felt comfortable in the role of a doctor. Instead, he was interested in studying human nature from a scientific approach (Ryckman, 1985, p. 26). He constructed a "tip of the iceberg" theory that likened the mind to an iceberg in which the smaller part showing above the surface of the water represents the region of consciousness while the much larger mass below the water level represents the region of unconsciousness. This vast domain, Freud maintained, contains the urges, passions, repressed ideas and feelings which exercise control over the conscious thoughts and deeds of people. Freud is sometimes called a *psychodynamic theorist* because he assumed the personality is developed by conscious and unconscious circumstances and conflicts that go on inside a person. In his view, therefore, limiting analysis to the consciousness is wholly inadequate for understanding human behavior (Hall & Lindzey, 1970, p. 31).

In Freud's opinion, conflicts often occur between the conscious and unconscious and among the components of each. People, therefore, are continuously and inevitably in the grips of a clash between at least two opposing forces. Life becomes a compromise that involves a dynamic balance of the forces (Maddi, 1972, p. 19). Freud identified three systems or components of the mind: the id, the ego, and the superego. According to Freud, conflicts arise as the three systems of the mind compete for the limited amount of psychic energy available, energy that has its starting point in the instinctual needs of the individual (Ryckman, 1985, p. 32).

The *id* is rooted in the biology of the individual and contains everything psychological that is inherited and that is present at birth, including instincts (Jones, 1963, p.). The id, which Freud called a "seething cauldron" has no knowledge of objective reality; rather, it is a reservoir of psychic energy that consists primarily of urges, primitive desires, and unconscious sexual and aggressive instincts. This part of the personality is amoral because it is unconcerned with the niceties and conventions of society. The id operates on the "pleasure principle"; that is, it is a force that always strives to maximize pleasure and minimize pain (Ryckman, 1985, p. 32).

People do not exist in a vacuum, however, and fitting into a society demands the individual control impulses. The *ego* forms to provide direction for impulses when a person's needs require interaction with the environment. The ego, therefore, develops to carry out the aims of the id by distinguishing between subjectivity and objectivity. The id

is concerned only with satisfying pleasure, but the ego offers realistic thinking (Ryckman, 1985, p. 33). The principal role of the ego is to mediate between the instinctual drives of the person and the conditions of the surrounding environment. As Freud stated, the ego is similar to a battlefield where the "armies" of the id and the superego continually clash (Freud, 1960, p. 7).

The third system of personality is the *superego*. The superego is the moral part of the personality. It tries to inhibit the impulses of the id, especially sexual and aggressive ones. The superego persuades the ego to substitute moralistic goals for realistic ones, to represent the ideal rather than the real, and to strive for perfection. It is concerned with what is right or wrong (Hall & Lindzey, 1970, p.34).

Freud's three parts of the personality might be likened to the transactional analysis theory that each person contains a child, and adult, and a parent. The id is the impulsive child in each person that provides the biological component of the personality; the ego is the rational adult that governs the psychological component; and the superego is the moralistic parent that oversees the social considerations. These various psychological processes can be in conflict with one another, as Freud himself pointed out in his analogy to armies clashing; but usually the three work as a team under the administrative leadership of the ego.

## Carl Jung

Carl Jung joined Freud in the study of the unconscious and in the development of the psychoanalytic theory. Jung, however, ultimately rejected many of Freud's perspective and created his own version of psychoanalysis and his own method of psychotherapy. Specifically, Jung's views the personality or psyche, as he calls it, as a number of differentiated but interacting systems. While Freud stressed the inherited, instinctive forces that shape personality, Jung emphasized the social and environmental factors. Jung maintained that a person's life is governed by aims as well as by causes. Freud theorized that the endless repetition of instinctual themes causes behavior, but Jung insisted destiny or purpose plays a role in a person's life (Hall & Lindzey, 1970, p.79).

According to Jung, behavior is caused not only by individual and racial history, or cause, but also by aspirations, purpose and design. "The flow of energy has a definite direction (goal) in that it follows the gradient of potential in a way that cannot be reversed" (Jung, 1960, p.4). In Jung's opinion, then, a person's ancestral history plays a part in determining personality, but this combines with other forces to give the whole picture. In other words, the racially influenced, collective personality selectively reaches into the world of experience and is, in turn, modified and elaborated by the experiences that it receives. The environment changes the individual, but in part, predispositions guide and determine what an individual will become conscious of and respond to (Hall & Lindzey, 1970, p. 81).

Critics of Jung debate that much of the theory fails to meet the criteria of precision and testability. Many find the theory vague, inconsistent, and complex. However, scientists have become more interested in testing some of the theories, and Jung's impact can be felt today. He introduced the view that people express four basic functions: thinking, feeling, sensing, and intuition. These dimensions, coupled with an understanding of a person's emotional orientation of introversion or extroversion, can be used to classify people according to their problem solving orientations. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which has become a respected and valuable tool for many organizations, was an outgrowth of Jung's theory about psychological types.

### Karen Horney

Another theorist, Karen Horney, was influenced greatly by psychoanalytic theory but became a critic of its limitations. Horney believed Freud had placed too much emphasis on the role of sexual instincts as the cause of neurosis and not enough on the cultural and social influences. While Freud expounded on the role sexual impulses play in causing problems, Horney argued disturbed human relationships are primarily to blame. Whereas Freud focused on the biological elements of the personality, Horney emphasized sociocultural conditioning. In Horney's judgment, unique social or interpersonal conditions, rather than biological make up have a more profound impact on an individual's ability to develop and function (Ryckman, 1985, p. 118).

As one of the few female theorists of this age, Horney stood apart because of her gender and because of her ability to add a different perspective on some of the male dominated views. For instance, she was critical of Freud's opinions about penis envy. Horney constructed a viewpoint that explained women do not suffer from penis envy as Freud had stated. Rather, women justifiably envy the qualities associated with certain aspects of masculinity in most cultures. Since laws, religion, morality, science, and art are created and dominated by men, unfortunately, in Horney's view, women have adapted themselves to the inferior status assigned to them (Horney, 1967, p. 55-57). Horney is usually linked to the psychoanalytic or to a social psychological perspective, but her theories about human growth and self-realization mark her as an important forerunner in the humanistic psychology movement.

### Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson was a German psychoanalytic ego psychologist who continued the work of the earlier psychoanalytic psychologists by giving special attention to the role of the ego in human development. Erikson's position represents an extension and a liberalization of Freud's view of the ego. In Freud's opinion, ego functioning was primarily concerned with satisfying a person's biological needs or with keeping the id's urges in check. Conversely, Erikson put much greater emphasis on the growth and positive functioning of the ego (Ryckman, 1985).

In other ways Freud's influence on Erikson is evident. Like Freud, Erikson postulated that human development occurs in a series of stages that are universal, and that they

progress in a predetermined way. Erikson, however, offered eight stages of development compared to Freud's four stages (Ryckman, 1985, p. 187).

Erikson is of particular interest to the student of group behavior because of his attention to *identity*. Erikson suggested that identity involves an integration by the ego of all previous identifications from participation in a variety of groups such as the family, church, school, and peers (Evans, 1967, p.36). According to Erikson, identity consists of the things within people, what they become and what they are supposed to become. A large part of the identity, then, is determined by what a person does for a living, on the support society gives the individual for this choice, and on the internalization of the ideals of the nation and culture (Erikson, 1964, p.93). Clearly, Erikson has been a vanguard in the study of group process and diversity awareness

### Trait Theories

Theorists have been waging the "nature / nurture" battle for centuries. Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Hippocrates were some of the early trait theorists. Often these names are not included in psychology texts, but each had something to say about the role innate traits play in determining a person's make-up.

There is not even agreement about what a trait is. Gordon Allport, one of the foremost trait psychologists, defined a trait as a "neuropsychic structure having the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent, and to initiate and guide equivalent (meaningfully consistent) forms of adaptive and expressive behavior" (1961, p. 347). Allport offered this definition for common traits, or traits that exist in all humans. However, he distinguished between these species universal traits and personal, unique traits. He defines an individual trait or *personal disposition* as "a generalized and focalized neuropsychic system (peculiar to the individual) with the capacity to render many stimuli functionally equivalent and to initiate and guide consistent (equivalent) forms of adaptive and expressive behavior" (Allport, 1937, p. 295).

Some trait theorists, like Allport, claimed invisible traits exist within the nervous system of a person and cause behavior. Others presented the argument that traits are elements of a person that can be used to describe patterns of behavior. Allport submitted that although common traits and personal disposition are really in a person, they cannot be observed directly; rather, they must be inferred from behavior.

Allport attempted to do justice to the complexity and uniqueness of the individual. He emphasized the importance of conscious motives and was convinced that the individual is more a creature of the present than of the past. He focused on normal behavior and accepted the "common-sense assumption that persons are real beings, that each has a real neuropsychic organization, and that our job is to comprehend this organization as well as we can" (Allport, 1966, p. 8).

Ralph Stogdill (1985) presented an interesting analysis of the trait theorists. He suggested traits considered singly hold little diagnostic or predictive significance. In

combination, however, they can generate personality dynamics, rather than traits, that are advantageous to a study of behavior. Stogdill criticized that the trait theories take an atomistic approach, viewing each personality variable as something that acts independently (p.82). Many critics object to Allport giving too much attention to what goes on inside the person and not enough credit to the impact of the environment or situation, but the behaviorists attempt to explain this role.

### Behaviorist Perspective

Two major perspectives have shaped the course of personality psychology. The first concerned itself with the study of causes, origins, or reasons for behavior. Some of these investigators were concerned primarily with abnormalities and their cures. These theorists, who were primarily medical doctors, attempted to find ways to cure patients.

The other major school of thought, conversely, had its roots in the experimental laboratory. These researchers were primarily concerned with the scientific understanding of the learning process. They assume most behavior is acquired or learned, and the task of the psychologist is to specify the environmental conditions responsible for producing behavior (Ryckman, 1985, p. 293).

#### B.F. Skinner

B. F. Skinner, one of the foremost behaviorists, had little patience for trait theorists who presuppose the existence of spirits within the body that move it (1974, p. 167). Skinner disputed that idiosyncratic learning history and unique genetic make-up of the individual account for personality development:

In a behavioral analysis, a person is an organism...which has acquired a repertoire of behavior...(he) is not an originating agent; he is a locus, a point at which many genetic and environmental conditions come together in a join effect. As such, he remains unquestionably unique. No one else (unless he has an identical twin) has his genetic endowment, and without exception no one else has his personal history. Hence, no one else will behave in precisely the same way (1974, p. 167-168).

Although Skinner recognized that each person possesses a genetic capacity to respond to events, he emphasized behavior takes place in situations and produces outcomes. According to Skinner, individuals operate on the environment to engender consequences (1953, p.65). Pavlov, an earlier theorist, influenced what Skinner called this link between behavior and consequences *conditioning*.

Skinner opposed the earlier theories that focused primarily on maturation. He recognized that maturation plays a role in development, but considers this approach too limited. Skinner espoused a position that stresses control or manipulation of events. As Skinner saw it, the primary objective of science is the prediction and control of events rather than a description of them (Skinner, 1953, p.6).

For these reasons, Skinner preferred to study personality by concentrating on the learning of a multitude of behaviors that allow the individual to survive and prosper in transactions with the environment. Skinner recognized that people are learning throughout life which situations provide satisfaction or pleasure and which produce pain (Ryckman, 1985, p. 314). Surviving and prospering are concerns of all of the personality theorists, but there is a division in the ranks about whether the skills for prospering are learned, as Skinner would suggest, or innate, as the humanists would challenge.

## Humanistic Theories

### Abraham Maslow

Abraham Maslow, one of the leading humanists, was influenced in some way by most of the preceding investigators. Most humanistic psychologists tend to see themselves as opposed to behaviorism and psychoanalysis, but Maslow included these psychologies in a larger superordinate structure (Maslow, 1971, p. 4).

The link to some of these earlier psychologists is more obvious than to others, but Maslow even used Freudian psychology to develop what is known as self-fulfillment theory or self-actualization theory. Maslow in no way denied the Freudian picture but did feel a need to supplement it. Maslow contended Freud supplied the sick half of psychology and the healthy half was conspicuously absent. This health psychology, as Maslow called it, offers more possibility for controlling and improving people (Maslow, 1968, p.5). Maslow set out to study the behavior of psychologically healthy people in order to learn more about the growth process. Maslow offered the following as the basic assumptions of this point of view :

- \* Each person has an essential biologically based inner nature that is unchanging.
  - \* Each person's inner nature is in part unique and in part species-wide.
  - \* Discovering (not inventing) this inner nature scientifically is possible.
  - \* The basic needs, for life, safety, belongingness, respect, and self-actualization, are natural, pre-moral, or good.
  - \* Encouraging this inner nature allows growth and happiness.
  - \* Suppressing this essential core of the person causes sickness.
  - \* This inner nature is not strong like instincts but is weak and delicate.
  - \* Even though it is weak, this inner nature rarely, if ever, disappears.
  - \* Overcoming adversity can help to foster a sense of achievement and ego strength.
- (Maslow, 1968, p. 3-4)

The objective of Maslow's theorizing was to establish a "scientific ethics, a natural value system, a core of ultimate appeal for the determination of good and bad, of right and wrong" (Maslow, 1968, p. 4). According to Maslow and other humanists, it is possible to specify a universal set of values that will provide a moral anchor so people will be able to decide what is right or wrong and good or bad. These values, rooted in the individual's biology, would allow people to make moral decisions by looking inside themselves instead of relying on the judgments of society. There is no agreement among

scholars about the existence of a universal set of values, Maslow admits, but this does not imply these values do not exist or they will never be identified (Ryckman, 1985, p.386).

Parts of Maslow's theory fly in the face of some religious dogma. According to Christian doctrine, people are born with original sin that must be removed through Baptism. Further, according to Christian teaching, man is not moral or good in and of himself. Instead, goodness must be learned. Maslow's viewpoint that people are born good, or at least neutral, has not been received well in some circles because of this departure from traditional thinking.

## Carl Rogers

Carl Rogers is another humanistic psychologist who focused on what he considered an innate motivation for actualizing tendency. This drive toward fulfillment enables people to enhance themselves. Rogers conceptualized that increasing awareness of true feelings causes the self-concept to become more congruent with the total experiences of the individual. Complete harmony within the person would allow full functioning, or self-fulfillment (Rogers, 1961).

Rogers identified the need for positive regard from significant others in self-concept and personality formation. He added that this positive regard is contagious. He suggested group process, tension reduction, and conflict resolution are all impacted by congruence of experience, awareness, and communication. According to Rogers, only one person in the relationship needs to feel congruence in order for changes to occur in other people (Rogers, 1961, p.344). This is an empowering statement for a student of group process. If Rogers is right, individuals in a group may possess more power or control than they might have perceived.

While many earlier researchers had grappled with the roles innate characteristics and environmental conditions play in personality formation, there was a significant gap remaining, according to Rogers. No earlier theorist had adequately emphasized the roles of interpersonal relationships and the individual's frame of reference in personality development. Rogers maintained that frame of reference can only be known to the person himself. "It can never be known to another except through empathic inference and then can never be perfectly known" (Rogers, 1959, p. 210). In Roger's view, subjective experiences of reality are critically important because they create the basis for all of the individual's judgments and behaviors.

## Conclusions

Comparing the major theories of personality and describing the similarities and differences of each provides a beginning for discussing the major controversies of the field. There is no theory that has been embraced wholeheartedly, and there is not even a common list of dimensions of personality. The nature / nurture debate continues with added and complex elements surfacing with each new theory. The dispute about whether the past or present has a more profound effect on behavior is yet unresolved.



Investigators disagree about the uniqueness of the individual versus the uniformity of the species. Some theorist drastically conflict, and others build on each other. However, studying these variety of perspectives is fruitful if it provides an inkling about human behavior, for from such inklings come answers.

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