Chapter Thirteen: Personality

How Can We Study It?

Personality consists of traits - relatively enduring predispositions that influence our behavior across many situations.

Two primary approaches:
- **Nomothetic approach** – focuses on identifying general laws that govern the behavior of all individuals (most modern research)
- **Idiographic approach** – focuses on identifying the unique configuration of characteristics and life history experiences within a person (most case studies)

Causes of Personality Differences

- Genetic factors
- Shared environmental factors (e.g., parents raise their children similarly)
- Nonshared environmental factors (e.g., parents treat one child more affectionately)
Causes of Personality Differences

- **Birth order** (nonshared environmental influence)
  - Later-borns are 3 times more likely than firstborns to favor revolutionary scientific ideas
  - Still controversial, little repeated evidence

- **Twin studies**
  - Genetic factors have a heavy influence on personality, but not complete control
  - Identical twins reared apart are as similar as identical twins reared together
  - Shared environment plays little to no role in adult personality

- **Molecular genetic studies** – pinpoint genes associated with specific personality traits
  - Remember that genes code for proteins, not specific behaviors

Apply Your Thinking

Imagine a specific gene is found to be more prevalent in Christians than in Muslims. Does this mean that this gene could be considered the Christianity gene? Why or why not?

Absolutely not. While the popular media might publicize this finding in a skewed manner, good scientists will not. Remember that genes code for proteins, not behaviors. This gene may code for any number of behaviors closely related to Christianity. Also, this gene may be more prevalent in certain areas of the world where different religions are practiced.

Psychoanalytic Theory

- Freud believed mental illness was psychogenic rather than somatogenic
  - Caused by psychological factors
  - Evidence from glove anesthesia, hypnosis, and catharsis

- Core assumptions:
  - Psychic determinism – all psychological events have a cause
  - Symbolic meaning – all actions are meaningful
  - Unconscious motivation – we rarely understand why we do things
Freud’s Pieces of the Mind

**Id** – basic instincts; the reservoir of our most primitive impulses, including sex and aggression

- **Pleasure principle** – the tendency of the id to strive for immediate gratification

**Ego** – the boss; the psyche’s executive and principal decision maker

- **Reality principle** – the tendency of the ego to postpone gratification until it can find an appropriate outlet

**Superego** – our sense of morality

---

Three Pieces in Conflict

Freud believed that these three agencies interacted continuously

Hypothesized that psychological distress is caused by disharmony between three agencies of the psyche

- All dreams are wish fulfillments – expression of the id’s impulses
- The superego commands the ego to convert these wishes into symbols
Anxiety & Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms – unconscious maneuvers intended to minimize anxiety
- Repression – motivated forgetting of emotionally threatening memories or impulses
- Denial – motivated forgetting of distressing external experiences
- Regression – act of returning psychologically to a younger, and typically simpler and safer, age
- Reaction-formation – transformation of an anxiety-provoking emotion into its opposite
- Projection – unconscious attribution of our negative characteristics to others

Anxiety & Defense Mechanisms

Displacement – directing an impulse from a socially unacceptable target onto a safer and more socially acceptable one
- Rationalization – providing a reasonable-sounding explanation for unreasonable behaviors or failures
- Intellectualization – avoiding emotions associated with anxiety-provoking experiences by focusing on abstract and impersonal thoughts
- Identification with the aggressor – process of adopting characteristics of people we find threatening
- Sublimation – transforming a socially unacceptable impulse into an admired goal

Freudian Personality Development

Personality develops in psychosexual stages differing in the erogenous zone, the sexually arousing area of the body:
- Oral stage (12-18 months) - infants obtain sexual gratification by sucking and drinking
- Anal stage (18 months-3 years) - focuses on toilet training
- Phallic stage (3-6 years) - focuses on genitals
  - Oedipus complex, Electra complex, and penis envy
- Latency stage (6-12 years) - sexual impulses are submerged into the unconscious
- Genital Stage (12 years - adulthood) - sexual impulses awaken and begin to mature into romantic attraction toward others
Criticisms of Freud

Unfalsifiability
Failed predictions
Lack of evidence for defense mechanisms
Questionable conception of the unconscious
Reliance on unrepresentative samples
Flawed assumption of shared environmental influences

Freud’s theories have exerted a profound influence on conceptions of the mind, but they are problematic, scientifically.

Freud’s Followers

Neo-Freudian theories - derived from Freud’s model:
  - Emphasize unconscious influences on behavior
  - Early experiences are important in shaping personality
  - Place less emphasis on sexuality as a driving force in personality
  - More optimistic regarding the prospects for long-term personality growth

Behavioral Views of Personality

Behaviorists believe personality is controlled by genetic factors and contingencies (reinforcers or punishers)

Determinists – believe all our actions are products of preexisting causal influences

Believe unconscious variables that play a role in causing behavior lie outside, not inside, us
Social Learning Theories

Emphasize thinking as a cause of personality
- Reciprocal determinism – mutual influence of personality and cognitive factors, behavior, and environment
- Observational learning – learning can occur by watching others
- **Locus of control** – extent to which people believe that reinforcers and punishers lie inside or outside of their control

Humanistic Model of Personality

Core motive in personality is **self-actualization**: the drive to develop our innate potential to the fullest possible extent
- Carl Rogers – personalities consist of three major components: organism, self, and **conditions of worth**
  - **Incongruence** – inconsistency between our personalities and innate dispositions
- Abraham Maslow – studied the characteristics of self-actualized people
  - Prone to **peak experiences** – transcendent moments of intense excitement and tranquility marked by a profound sense of connection to the world

Trait Theories of Personality

**Factor analysis** – statistical technique that analyzes the correlations among responses on personality inventories
- Used to reduce a large diversity of personality traits into as few as three to five factors
- Walter Mischel – argued that personality traits did not predict behavior very well
- Seymour Epstein – demonstrated that while Mischel was correct for specific events, personality traits can predict aggregated behaviors
Trait Theories of Personality

**Big Five** - traits that have surfaced repeatedly in factor analysis of personality measures

- Uncovered using *lexical approach* – most crucial features of personality are embedded in language
- Extraversion – social and lively
- Neuroticism – tense and moody
- Conscientiousness – careful and responsible
- Agreeableness – friendly, and easy to get along with
- Openness – intellectually curious

Evaluating the Big Five

Able to predict real-world behaviors

- Some question the lexical approach because there may be *unconscious features* of personality
- There appear to be limits to the cross-cultural universality

Other Considerations

- Cultural influences on personality:
  - Individualistic vs. Collectivistic societies
  - National character? No evidence to support

- We can express our personality traits in different ways: basic tendencies vs. characteristic adaptations
  - Sensation seekers - firefighting vs. crime

- Most personality traits don’t change much after age 30

- Trait models focus on description, rather than explanation, of individual differences
Personality Assessment

Structured personality tests – paper-and-pencil tests consisting of questions that respondents answer in one of a few fixed ways.

Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) – widely used structured test designed to assess symptoms of mental disorders.

- Built using empirical method of test construction: an approach in which researchers begin with two or more criterion groups, and examine which items best distinguish them.
- Results in low face validity – the extent to which respondents can tell what the items are measuring.

MMPI and Validity

What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of having low face validity?

Advantages:
- Does not allow people to consciously skew results toward a positive or negative diagnosis.
- May add unconscious feelings to the evaluation that cannot be done with direct questions.

Disadvantages:
- Questions without direct relevance may not be helpful in evaluating personality.
- Subjects may think questions are not important and give random answers.

MMPI-2 Profile
**Personality Assessment**

**Projective tests** - consist of ambiguous stimuli that examinees must interpret

**Projective hypothesis** – examinees project aspects of their own personality onto the ambiguous stimulus
   - Rorschach Inkblot Test
   - Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)
   - Human figure drawings
   - Graphology

Lack **incremental validity**

---

**Pitfalls in Personality Assessment**

**P.T. Barnum effect** – tendency of people to accept high base rate descriptions as accurate
   - Demonstrates that personal validation (subjective judgments of accuracy) are a flawed method for evaluating a test’s validity

**Illusory correlation** – the perception of nonexistent statistical associations between variables in personality test results