Strategic Application of Human Development Applying Positive Psychology

Psychology School of Personality

5.1 Introduction

Personality psychology looks for answers to numerous questions. In what ways do human beings differ? In what situations and along what dimensions do they differ? Why do they differ? How much do they differ? How consistent are human differences? Can they be measured? These are the issues that this text will explore. An important aspect of this exploration will be a critical examination of the numerous theories that have been proposed to explain personality. Some of these are competing and contradictory while others are supportive and complementary.

Sub-disciplines of psychology such as social psychology, cognitive psychology, and industrial psychology endeavor to find common principles that will explain everyone's behavior. These subfields have achieved considerable success in doing so, since we are all similar in many ways. Despite our similarities, however, there is little doubt that each human being is unique—different from every other individual on the planet. Seeking to understand human commonalities and seeking to account for individual differences are complementary, insofar as we cannot fully apprehend differences if we cannot identify our common characteristics.

5.2 Abstracts of Personalities

Personality psychology was a latecomer among the various disciplines within psychology. Before it was adopted as a subject for study, however, it was already well established as a topic of discussion in the public domain. People have always been practicing personality psychology whether they have recognized it or not. When we seek the right person for a mate, our judgment of his or her personality is indispensable in evaluating our hoped-for compatibility.

And are personnel directors really doing anything other than analyzing the applicant's personality during a job interview? Similarly, when we describe a physician as a "good doctor," have we really assessed the caliber of his or her medical knowledge? Or are we saying that we are satisfied with the doctor's

professional persona? When we listen to political speeches, how do we rate the orators? Are we looking at their command of the issues or their political acumen? Or is it essentially their personality that we appraise? In most cases, it would seem the latter. These examples illustrate the omnipresence of informal personality assessment. It is a subject of universal interest and continual relevance in all human interactions. On the other hand, although the study of personality is compelling and important, personality as such is also very hard to pin down.

Personality falls under the heading of things that most people believe they understand. In fact, there is probably no domain within any field of knowledge in which more people think they have achieved some expertise. Simply put, most people believe they can know or understand other people. We all try to predict behavior, interpret conversations, and make inferences about others' actions. If someone offends us, acts strangely, or seems excessively kind, we will quickly try to understand their motives. In addition, we often draw inferences about what kind of people they are; that is, what personality traits they may possess. Most of us regard ourselves as competent judges of personality. We make use of our skills in personality assessment on a daily basis; however, most of us would have a difficult time explaining exactly how we draw our conclusions about others.

Besides evaluating and rating each other's personalities, we also tend to be confident that we are very good in so doing. It is rare to find someone who admits that he or she is not a good judge of people and does not understand the behavior of others. As this text will show, most of us are not only often incorrect in our assessments of others but also overconfident of our abilities. Most people have an innate trust in their ability to impute underlying motives to the actions of others. We are personality experts, or at least think we are. Moreover, once we evaluate someone else's personal qualities, we tend to interpret their subsequent actions through the lens of our initial assessment, making it difficult to see that we might have been inaccurate in the first place.

We tend to go through our lives categorizing the people we encounter under various labels. Our language is replete with words that describe types or groups of people, many of them quite pejorative. Words like ***macho, wimp, nerd, milquetoast, playboy, redneck, square,* and *hippie* are used to categorize a type of person,** most often one we find undesirable. This tendency to categorize people makes a great deal of sense in some contexts because it is a universal human characteristic to impose order on complex situations. As complex as human behavior can be, repeating patterns can be discerned.

Almost all human encounters involve classifying and categorizing personalities. For example, business people typically judge their associates on their general demeanor, physical bearing, verbal style, and presumed ability to fit into the milieu of a specific organization. University professors presenting technical papers to their colleagues will be judged to some extent on their personality. Indeed, it is hard to conceive of any interpersonal interaction in which the appraisal of personality does not play an important role.

Can anybody really understand human personality? Furthermore, does it even exist? Or is it a convenient construct that is so intangible as to have no meaning? In fact, some experts do not accept the notion that people have consistent personalities. These experts espouse **situationalism**; the most extreme members of this group reject the concept of personality completely. Situationalists propose that differences in human behavior are artifacts of the various situations in which human beings find themselves, as well as their cultural environments or social surrounds. The authors of this text, however, are confident that the construct of personality is real and legitimate and will demonstrate its legitimacy in the chapter on individual differences.

5.3   Personality: A Fuzzy Set

In mathematics, a **fuzzy set** is a set of objects in which each member is assigned a number that indicates the degree to which the member belongs to the set. For example, although people are often assigned to the set of conservative or liberal, any individual's actual assignment would, most appropriately, be a function of their accepting certain beliefs or principles over competing beliefs. Hence, as someone adopts more beliefs regarding minimal government intervention, the probability of their being assigned to the conservative set increases.

In contrast, as someone adheres to an increasing number of beliefs in favor of social welfare programs, the probability of being assigned to the liberal set increases. Thus, unlike a more clearly defined set like gender, a membership in a fuzzy set is probabilistic. Fuzzy set theory is often used in decision making with imprecise data. Some observers would define theories of personality as an example of a fuzzy set because the concept of personality seems so imprecise.

Potter Stewart, a former associate justice of the Supreme Court, once made a telling statement about pornography. Stewart said, "I cannot define it, but I know it when I see it." He could just as easily have been describing personality. Most of us

think we have a personality; we recognize personalities in others; but most of us would have a difficult time pinning down exactly what the word means. Here are some recent attempts at defining personality:

The collective perceptions, emotions, cognitions, motivations, and actions of the individual that interact with various environmental situations. (Patrick & Léon-Carrión, 2001) The psychological forces that make people uniquely themselves. (Friedman & Schustack, 2006)

The characteristic manner in which one thinks, feels, behaves, and relates to others. (Widiger, Verheul, & van den Brink, 1999) If we desired, we could fill an entire book with elegant but divergent definitions of personality. Most would bear a family resemblance to one another, but no two would be completely concordant. How can this be? How can a term that is used by both professionals and lay people on a daily basis not have a standard definition? Perhaps the variations exist for that very reason—that is, when a clinical or technical term enters everyday speech, it loses its original precision. For this and related reasons, the editors of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) typically change the names of several psychological disorders in each new edition.

An example of this transition is the term **psychosomatic**. This term originally referred to a physical symptom or disorder caused or notably influenced by psychological dysfunction. Over time, however, *psychosomatic* came to be used in popular magazines or newspapers to refer to imaginary or **psychogenic** symptoms. It was ultimately replaced in the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-IV; APA, 2000) by a diagnostic category titled Psychological Factors Affecting Medical Condition. The example given in the manual of a medical condition affected by a psychological factor is that of a person with weight-related diabetes who continues to overeat from anxiety.

The definition of personality that will be used in this text is: behaviors, styles of thought, speech, perception, and interpersonal interactions that are consistently characteristic of an individual. This definition includes both the overt and covert actions of an individual. Covert actions refer to all cognitive processes, both conscious and **nonconscious**. It is important to note that our use of the term *nonconscious* is not the same as the psychoanalytic use of unconscious. As will be further discussed in the chapter on cognitive models of personality, the human brain processes a great deal of information outside its field of conscious awareness. These are called nonconscious cognitions.

5.4   Normal and Pathological Personalities

Although distinguishing between a normal personality and one that is dysfunctional, ill, or otherwise problematic may seem simple, it is not. The distinction between *normal* and *abnormal* remains one of the most vexing issues in personality psychology. When describing a normal personality, we can be certain of one thing—that our definition will be found lacking at least by some people. The Quaker saying, "All the world is queer save me and thee, and sometimes I think thee is a little queer," definitely captures the subjective nature of defining normality.

The distinction between *normal* and *pathological* is almost always arbitrary and, to some extent, an expression of the preferences of the individual making the distinction. Of course, in the case of such severe extremes as obsessive or compulsive personalities, or of individuals falling within the spectrum of **schizophrenia**, even a layperson can often determine that there is some pathology to be found in the afflicted person's personality. It is not, for example, normal for people to hear voices commanding them to kill someone, as the assassin of President James Garfield claimed after shooting him in 1881 (Rosenberg, 1968). By definition, however, such extreme conditions are unusual.

Another obvious means of determining pathology is by self-report. People who have personalities that cause them subjective misery can clearly be categorized as having pathological characteristics. Most personalities, however, cluster around the central tendencies of the more common personality configurations. Choosing the point at which a divergence from that mean becomes pathological is difficult. It involves making sharp divisions in what is basically a continuum—a problem that recurs in other contexts.

Each of the various schools of psychology has its own means of distinguishing the normal from the pathological. For example, a Freudian psychoanalyst would posit defects in the person's **intrapsychic** defense mechanisms, perhaps a breakdown of **ego** defenses against **id** impulses. Or the psychoanalyst might say that the overinvestment of mental energy in an intrapsychic **object** can result in a pathological personality. A simpler model of pathology was proposed by the classical school of behaviorism. Behaviorists regard all personality pathology as resulting from aberrant conditioning and subsequent reinforcement. For example, a behaviorist would say that a perennially shy person was trained to be this way through parental **reinforcement**, and his/her personality remains shy due to reinforcers found in the person's present environment.

Virtually all approaches to the study of personality can be divided into two categories, idiographic and nomothetic. The oldest approach and the one employed in literature for millennia is the **idiographic.** Idiographic personality theorists stress the uniqueness of individual personalities, suggesting that no two are exactly alike. A follower of this approach would study each person as a complete and unique entity and would not compare his or her personality to others.

5.5   Personality Assessment

Virtually all interpersonal interactions involve a personality assessment. All prospective lovers will have their personalities rated by those who arouse their passions. And what is a job interview if not a personality test (Yadav, 1990)?As we will discuss in detail in later chapters, assessments like those carried out in job interviews may lack standardization, reliability, and validity, but they are indeed personality tests.

Every human encounter is at least in part a personality assessment. Indeed, while some observers strongly object to formal, objective, and empirically evaluated personality tests, all of us are both subjects and administrators of a subjective personality test with each such encounter. People tend to identify with generic and positive descriptions of personality; that is, we all tend to be easily convinced that someone or some system (like astrology) has captured our essence, even though it actually presents only benign generic descriptions with which most people would identify.

An American psychologist named Bertram R. Forer (1914–2000) conducted an interesting experiment in 1948, which he described in an article published in 1949. He gave his students a personality test and then gave each of them a personality analysis supposedly based on the results of the test. He then asked the students to rate their analysis as to how well it applied to them on a scale ranging from 0 = *very poorly* to 5 = *excellent*. The students gave their analyses an average rating of 4.27.   Forer then revealed that he had given all the students the identical personality analysis and that he had compiled it from a series of newspaper horoscopes. Here is the analysis that Forer (1949) gave his students:

You have a need for other people to like and admire you, and yet you tend to be critical of yourself. While you have some personality weaknesses you are generally able to compensate for them. You have considerable unused capacity that you have not turned to your advantage. Disciplined and self-controlled on the outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure on the inside. At times you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing. You prefer

a certain amount of change and variety and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations. You also pride yourself as an independent thinker; and do not accept others' statements without satisfactory proof. But you have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extroverted, affable, and sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, and reserved.

The way a person responds to clusters of these items actually constitutes characteristic behavioral responses associated with personality types or traits. This approach to personality assessment has proven to have a high level of **validity**. On the horizon are new techniques utilizing fMRI, positron emission tomography (PET) scans, and others that directly associate personality with activity in specific areas of the brain. These techniques are in their infancy; but it is likely that the next generation of personality psychologists will have powerful tools to assist them in understanding human nature.

5.6   Traits, Typologies, And Character
Most of us are inclined to categorize people; psychologists are no exception. Freud proposed several character types based on his theory of childhood development. The so-called oral, anal, urethral, phallic, and genital personalities refer to persons whose sexual energies became diverted or stalled during certain phases of development. The English language is replete with far more terms that describe types of character or personality. Words like *shy*, *aggressive*, *kind*, *introverted*, *neurotic*, **or** *fixated* are just samples of the nearly 17,000 English terms that describe personal attributes. The abundance of these descriptors raises an important question: Did natural language evolve to describe personality accurately? Or do these terms really describe overt behaviors rather than lasting and enduring traits?

The evidence seems to suggest a weak *yes* to the former supposition. Most personality psychologists generally agree that composites of these terms are indeed useful in describing human personality when combined along specific dimensions known as factors. As of the early 2000s, the Five-Factor Model best describes the dimensions of personality.

5.7   The Rational Emotive Behavioral Perspective
In addition to a thorough review of the major theories and perspectives, this text will set forth its own model and perspective, based on the work of its first author, Dr. Albert Ellis (1913– 2007). His theory of personality, referred to as the Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) model, is described here. Dr. Ellis practiced psychoanalysis in New York City prior to 1955 but left the field of traditional

psychoanalysis in that year to practice a more directive form of psychotherapy, which he first called Rational-Emotive Therapy or RET. He later changed its name to Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT). For close to half a century the practice of REBT has been predicated on a theory of human personality, but prior to the early 2000s, Ellis's theory has largely been implied in his books rather than stated explicitly. Ellis's formal break with his psychoanalytic training came with the publication of his paper, "Rational Psychotherapy," which was first delivered as a lecture at the American Psychological Association's annual convention in Chicago on August 31, 1956. The paper was then published in the *Journal of General Psychology*; it was one of the earliest contributions to cognitive theories of personality. Unlike such theorists as George Kelly (1905–1966) and Albert Bandura (1925–), Ellis was a clinician who described his findings in clinical terms.

Evolutionary advantage may also explain genetic tendencies toward obesity in some populations. In times of famine, people who gain weight easily, have a lower metabolic rate, and are more motivated to seek food will be far more likely to survive and reproduce. In the same manner as obesity and the sickle cell trait, many human behavioral tendencies evolved in very different ecological settings from those of our current world. The environment in which modern humans lived as hunters and gatherers for 99% of their existence has been termed the **environment of evolutionary adaptedness** (EEA) by John Bowlby (1907–1990) as part of his **attachment theory**.

The human EEA is broadly identified with the Pleistocene era, a period of prehistoric time that began about 1.8 million years ago and ended about 12,000 years ago. Modern humans are left with behavioral and emotional residues that were probably quite adaptive in the Pleistocene era. For example, the well-known "fight or flight" reaction to stress increased a primitive human's chances of survival when confronted by a predatory animal. In the contemporary world, however, this same reaction may predispose us to respond with inappropriate and maladaptive emotions—as when a driver cut off in traffic gives in to "road rage" and behaves in ways that may actually cost lives (Gaylin, 1984, p. 124).

It follows then that much of what is considered unacceptable behavior not only might be beneficial in a different environment but might actually endow some people with a distinct survival advantage. The concept of the EEA is integral to the REBT model of personality and psychotherapy. People are innately irrational partly because they have acquired a set of behavioral inclinations adapted to different times and places.

As Daniel Kahneman (1934–) and his colleague Amos Tversky (1937–1996) (Kahneman & Tversky, 2000; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, 1983) have observed, people make decisions based on universal **heuristics**, or rules of thumb encoded in the human psyche by evolutionary processes. These rules of thumb are used by psychologists to explain how people make decisions or value judgments, or solve problems when they are dealing with incomplete information. Many of these heuristics may superficially seem logical and adaptive, but on closer examination, they lead to poor or biased decisions. A commonplace example, well known to the advertising industry, is that people typically perceive an expensive name brand of food as tasting "better" than a generic store brand. Kahneman and Tversky concluded that people have a very poor ability to judge probabilities.

Such a universal tendency is unlikely to be accidental. These heuristics, like Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory, may be an evolutionary residue that allowed humans to make snap judgments in less complex times. The "quick and dirty" decision strategies essential in avoiding information overload but likely to lead to fallacies are called cognitive heuristics.