Personality Theory Paper

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Introduction

Personologists have spent years trying to establish one working theory that explains why individuals behave and think the way they do. Theorists within the six domains of personality (dispositional, biological, intrapsychic, cognitive-experimental, social/cultural, and adjustment) have all presented explanations that attempt to enlighten on the developmental process and differences seen in personality. Most all theories within the six domains agree that humans display actions and behaviors that can be categorized as traits, which combined make up one’s personality. The six domains also agree that personality is fairly consistent over time; subtle shifts only seen due to environmental factors and or life extremities. Where the different domains disagree is on the how’s and why’s of personality. For example, some theorists’ conclude that individuals were born with their full personality while others say personality develops over time.

Part of the reason for the different directions of the domain theories is the complex nature of humanity. There are several outliers for humans when it comes to behaviors and there are several aspects such as sudden changes in personality that are difficult to pinpoint as to why they occur. Personologists have attempted to provide grand theories of personality, but all have been debunked in one way or another. This does not mean the theories have no validity; in fact the different domains have developed sophisticated methods for researching personality traits and development. Elements such as the widely utilized Myers-Briggs test, the Big Five Model, and IQ test, give great insight into human personality and intelligence. These elements have also been important to personologists explaining aspects of potential human behaviors. Personality is best explained when combining elements from the biological, intrapsychic, and social-cognitive domains. The combination creates can a theory on how personality is structured, developed, and can change over a lifespan, as well as provide insight on human nature.
Personality Structure

Personality is the set of traits and characteristics that motivate an individual’s thoughts and perceptions, which then go on to persuade an individual’s interactions with their environment. Traits and characteristics are elements such as agreeableness, openness, neuroticism, extraversion, etc. that are on a spectrum. These traits and characteristics come to shape an individual’s interactions with their environment. Before the environmental interaction occurs, the individual has subjective thoughts and perceptions on a conscious and unconscious level. Thoughts and perceptions lead to specific actions with people, situations, and internal cognition that come to make up one’s environment. No two people have the exact same personality, even if they share similar traits. Personality is unique to each individual, but through a trait system individuals cluster together. With uniqueness considered, every individual’s personality consists of the four components: consistency, psychology, physiology, and behaviors/actions (Cherry, 2014).

Four Components of Personality

Consistency provides the basic structure for personality because it shows a chain of actions that can be followed and interpreted, thus making traits possible. Consistency refers to recognizable order and regularity in behaviors; essentially, people act in the same ways or similar ways in a variety of situations (Cherry, 2014). For example, someone who is categorized as an introvert will regularly need or want time to themselves in a quiet environment. Consistency means this preference to be alone will last a lifetime, not just a phase. The consistency seen in personality is due to its roots in an individual’s physiology.

Current research suggests that personality is not merely an abstract social construct, but something that can be seen in human genetics. An example of this can be found in the case study
of the Jim Twins. The Jim Twins did not meet each until adulthood, and discovered some shocking similarities upon getting to know each other. Although both Jim’s were adopted by different families from birth, along with sharing the same name they shared similar lifestyle choices such as the brand of cigarettes they smoked, the number of ex-wives, the names of their sons, and chosen profession (Larsen, Washington, Louis, and Buss, 2013). The Jim Twins case is extreme, but there are other examples that personality has biological links, such as research on individual’s disposition for happiness. The biological link shows that personality is not a random occurrence, but rather an element that is in play from birth. Seeing as genes are not sole determiners of personality, it is only logical that cognition would play a role in personality as well.

An individual’s psychological disposition plays a part in their personality, especially concerning perception. A large component of personality is how one perceives different elements in their environment. Two individuals can be involved in a car accident and have two different outlooks on the event. A highly neurotic person will see the event in a catastrophizing manner, losing emotional control; someone who is emotionally stable will be thankful no one in the accident including themselves was harmed and choose a more hopeful outlook. Physiologically both people in these events experienced the same accident, but psychologically they will have two separate different experiences due to different levels of neuroticism/emotional stability.

The unconscious mind provides a fair amount of insight into many daily motivating events of personality. Sigmund Freud proposed that individuals have strong intimate forces he called “instincts” that guide cognitive and physical actions. Though Freud was referring to more primitive actions, there can be truth found in the idea that people instinctively gravitate to varying situations. Introverts are more likely to gravitate away from crowds of people, whereas
extroverts are more likely to gravitate towards crowds of people. This process is not always on a conscious level, but this occurs nonetheless with people who fall on either end of the spectrum. This gives weight to the idea that there is motivated unconscious processing in the mind that is motivating. These unconscious forces are important to personality because they come to directly motivate individuals' environmental behaviors.

The last component to personality is the behaviors and actions personality influences. Behavior is key to personality because it is what provides the ability for observation, interaction, and measurability. Someone with the trait of extraversion is internally motivated to be outgoing. This individual will perceive social events as exciting and stimulating. This will lead to them engaging in many conversations, and in many cases becoming the life of the party. Social interaction is heavily guided by personality, with informal assessments of personality accruing between individuals on a consistent basis. Individuals align themselves with people who match their needs for companionship. These needs are assessed by behaviors observed, which go on to match people by personality.

Behaviors also have the ability to change personality if they are able to affect an individual’s perceptions. Someone who is highly neurotic may display a lot of anxiety-based behaviors such as rumination. This action of rumination creates the personality of someone who is considered a worry wart, but if the rumination diminishes in frequency this can alter the individual’s perception. This can completely change the essence of who an individual is, giving them a more relaxed disposition. A relaxed disposition turns into calmer behaviors such as the ability to take risks and make decisive decisions. Personality structure can vary greatly between individual with the different traits and characteristics they display, but all persons share a similar course when it comes to personality development.
Personality Development

An individual’s personality is fully developed by the onset of adulthood around the age of 25. By this time in a person’s life they have had enough social and biological development to have a fully functioning personality that display consistency in perceptions and behaviors. This is not to say children do not have functioning personalities. There are some newborn babies who are easily calmed while other are inconsolable the majority of the time. This trait of being consolable is an early sign of emotional stability that could persist throughout life. The potential for change is what makes children’s personalities underdeveloped. There are those who feel they are the same are they were as young children and others who feel a dramatic change. Rather a grand change appears or not is due to biological development throughout a person’s early years.

Biological Development

Personality is in development from the moment a child is developing their primitive brain in the fetus stage. Genes passed down from parents include perception shaping traits and behavioral habits. Study on chimpanzees mothers found a link between the mother's stress response and their future offspring (Begley, 2007). For the experiment chimpanzee mothers were placed in a stressful setting to develop a high-stress response from environmental stimulus (2007). Then these chimps were bread with male chimps that lived in a natural environment (2007). The offspring were studied and the results showed that the chimp offspring, who were separated from their birth mothers, showed high-stress responses to the same environmental stimulus as their mothers whom they had never interacted with (2007).

The chimp study reveals that there is a biological key to personality development. Part of the reason the newborn chimps showed the same stress response as their mothers is due to the exposure to the stress hormone cortisol while in the womb. Cortisol increases the fight or flight
responses to environmental stimuli to help with survival. Unfortunately, high level of cortisol in the body keeps up a high level of anxiety. Anxiety in context with personality causes behaviors of rumination, self-doubt, and perfectionism. Anxiety also arouses repeated perceptions of fear and danger, even when it’s not present.

Biology does not always paint a peak picture of personality development. Many studies have been conducted a person’s disposition to be happy. Research shows that about 40% of a person’s nature to be happy is biological (Larsen, Washington, Louis, & Buss, 2013). Certain children will naturally be happier than others from birth, and are more inclined to continue perceiving happiness in their lifetime. Happiness leads to optimistic, persistent, and resilient personality types; these are individuals who others are drawn to whether they are introverts or extroverts. In sum, biology provides individuals with basic perceptive dispositions which form primitive personalities. These primitive perceptions go on to establish more developed personality traits as the brain develops and more worldly experiences are gained, but these traits can easily change during the onset of adolescents.

Puberty is a time for several biological changes in an individual’s body. These changes are due to hormones in the body preparing for the potential of reproduction. During this time, the amygdala (center for emotional control) is hyperactive (Berger, 2014). Conversely, the prefrontal cortex (center for decision making and risk assessment) is underdeveloped. In fact, the prefrontal cortex does not fully develop until around the age of 25. During this time, adolescents are running on hyperactive emotions with a need for sensation, while they are unable to properly assess their emotions and decisions.

For personality puberty signals some dramatic changes. The once quiet dormant child can morph into a risky volatile teenager seeming overnight. A positive is that many teens become
more open to experiences due to increased curiosity and a need for sensation; due to poor
decision-making capabilities can engage in drug use and risky sexual behavior. Teenagers gain
the ability to put forth false personalities depending on their environment. For example, a
teenage girl can realize her boyfriend appreciates low levels of consciousness while her parents
expect high levels of consciousness. This girl could come to manipulate her behaviors to match
both expectations no matter where she naturally is on the spectrum of consciousness.

Dramatic changes and manipulation of personality is not the norm for personality during
puberty, it’s simply a possibility depending an individual’s biological structure. For many,
puberty can still be a confusing time but they do not experience many changes in their
personality. Teenagers can mature in personality during puberty rather than having dramatic
shifts. For example, a young boy who was introverted as a young child may now start to engage
in more social activities such as sports, while still holding the notion that he needs solitude to
recharge. The reason r that personality cannot be considered fully developed during this time is
the potential for inconsistency. Consistency is needed for a fully developed personality. Due to
hyperactive emotion and low processing for decision making, a teen can be very inconsistent in
personality; time has not revealed which traits will fade and which ones will remain persistent.
Biology is not the end of the story when it comes to personality, which is also deeply influenced
by the way an individual is socialized.

Social-Cognitive Development

Socialization is impactful to personality development from a very early age. One of the
first things new parents want to know about their newborn about is the gender. Although gender
roles do not determine personality, how girls and boy are socialized according to gender role
does have an impact. There are specific traits that are socially expected from genders; i.e. males are expected and often encouraged to be aggressive. Aggressive is expected from males because under tradition social constructs men need aggressiveness in order to protect and provide for their families. Aggressiveness is also a trait associated with leadership, a quality that to still present day is still considered to be masculine.

Due to social ideas on what traits men and women should have, the environment tries to manipulate the traits individuals display. A young boy who is extroverted, outgoing, and aggressive will excel in social in several social environments. This success is observed by other adolescent boys and often modeled because of its appeal and praise. Parents nurture these so-called masculine traits in young boys, with toys and the reinforcement of sports. Nurturing, consciousness, and agreeableness are encouraged in young girls. These traits are viewed as feminine, although men can also attain them. When one’s personality traits do not align with societal norms individuals tend to be considered eccentric. Although society tries, biological predispositions and personal preferences win out with personality traits individuals.

The environment itself can play a role in how an individual’s personality is shaped. Take the traits of aggressiveness again, children who developed within a violent/stressful environment and go on to gain aggressive and anxiety ridden personalities. A study conducted in 1990 on inner-city Chicago youth found that the children who grew up in areas with heavy violence on display took on more violent behaviors such as fighting (Kotulak). These children were also hyper-protective of family and friends, showing early signs of anxiety due to them seeing and experiencing loved ones murdered (Kotulak, 1990).

Luckily, the social-cognitive domain is correspondingly responsible for personality changes. Personality change is due to one’s personality being maladaptive to their current
environment. For example, if one of the Chicago inner city children were to be taken out of their violent environment and placed somewhere safe, a change would appear in their personalities. Without the constant perceptions of fear, the children would have the potential to reshape their behaviors, thus altering their personalities. Even if the traits do not disappear, aggressiveness and stress can be molded to be more adaptive. For example, instead of fighting, aggression can be channeled in sports. This reshapes the child’s perceptions towards competitiveness versus violence. Consciously, individuals are somewhat aware of how their environment shapes their personalities, but a lot can be said for what individuals are not consciously aware of as well.

**Intrapsychic Development**

Like all of human nature, there are aspects of personality development that are not known. Eric Erikson first 5 stages of psychosocial development give great insight into unconscious motivation for personality. Erikson’s stages reveal how the traits of hopefulness, willfulness, purposefulness, competency, and faithfulness can develop from childhood to adulthood. Erikson last three stages are not included because they have more to do with an individual’s outlook on life with already developed personality.

The first stage of trust v. mistrust gives insight into the traits of extraversion and introversion. During the trust v. mistrust stage, infants are learning patterns of attachment. When infants securely attach to parents they are able to form trusting relationships in the future. This leads to people being more sociable, and having hope in others. However, if an infant does not securely attach they have problems trusting other in future relationships. In the context of introverts, they find social interactions draining due to the fact that they struggle to develop trust. This also leads to hopeless personalities which bring out the trait of pessimism.
Another stage that gives insight into unconscious personality development is industry versus inferiority. During this stage, individuals develop their level of competency, which translates into the traits of consciousness. Someone who is industrious feels they can do things for themselves with competence. This translates into consciousness because these individuals feel they are responsible for their actions and the outcomes of their life. Personality wise these individuals tend to develop into perfectionists and are highly internal driven. Conversely, individuals who become “inferior” tend to be low of consciousness because they have low self-confidence and feel they have no control over their environment. These individuals can develop lazy personalities, but are more relaxed socially.

**Human Nature**

Human nature can be difficult to explain in context with personality. Personality is an element that develops over time and has heavy dealing in subjective perceptions, whereas the subject of human nature calls for a more objective explanation. Since there are certain traits that originate from birth, it can be argued that there is a part of human nature that is inherently evil. However, some individuals have a biological predisposition for positive traits so there’s an argument for inherit goodness. English philosopher John Locke proposed the idea of Tabula rasa (Wilson, 2000). Tabula rasa refers to the idea that individuals are born without built-in mental content and that therefore all knowledge comes from experience or perception (Wilson). From the moment of conception, there are different environmental and biological forces that act on humans that go on to create a personality, which translate into a predisposition for certain behaviors both good and bad. Human nature is neither inherently good nor bad, but rather a blank slate that is acted on that creates good and evil.

**Conclusion**
In sum, personality is the set of traits and characteristics that motivate an individual’s thoughts and perceptions, which then go on to persuade an individual’s interactions with their environment. Personality is structured around these four components: consistency, psychology, physiology, and behaviors. Personality development is dependent on an individual’s biological predisposition for certain behaviors, social-cognitive environmental factors, and psychosocial development. Through development, an individual attains certain traits that come to dictate perceptions and behaviors; traits are consistent not fixed. By changing cognitive processing of the environment, individuals can come to alter their traits, thus changing their personality.
References


