Measuring Personality: Crash Course Psychology #22

Crash Course: Psychology
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How would you describe your personality? Maybe friendly, creative, quirky? What about nervous, or timid, or outgoing? But has anyone ever called you a sanguine? What about a Kapha, or full of metal? Ancient Greek physician Hippocrates believed personality manifested itself in four different humors, and, basically, you are who you are because of your balance of phlegm, blood, and yellow and black bile.

According to traditional Chinese medicine, our personalities depend on the balance of five elements: Earth, Wind, Water, Metal and Fire. Those who practice traditional Hindu Ayurvedic Medicine view each other as unique combinations of three different mind-body principles called Doshas. But Sigmund Freud thought our personalities depended in part on who was winning the battle of urges between the Id, Ego, and Superego. Meanwhile, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow suggested that the key to self-actualization was first successfully climbing a hierarchy of more basic needs. And then, you've got your BuzzFeed quizzes to determine what kind of pirate, or font, or sandwich, or Harry Potter character you are, but, that, I would never take one of those seriously.

All this is to say that people have been characterizing one another for a long, long time, and whether you're into blood, or bile, or ego, or id, or BLT, or PB&J, there are a lot of ways to describe and measure a personality. And all these theories, all the years of research, and cigar smoking, and inkblot gazing, and the fans debating whether they're more of a Luke or a Leia, they're all funneling down to one big central question. Who, or what, is the self?

[Intro]

Last week we talked about how psychologists often study personality by examining the differences between characteristics, and by looking at how these various characteristics combine to create a whole thinking, feeling person. The early psychoanalytic and humanistic theorists had a lot of ideas about personality, but some psychologists question their lack of clearly measurable standards. Like, there was no way to really quantify someone's inkblot response, or how orally fixated they might be. So this drive to find a more empirical approach spawned two more popular theories in the twentieth century, known as the trait and social cognitive perspectives.

Instead of focusing on things like lingering unconscious influences or missed growth opportunities, trait theory researchers look to define personality through stable and lasting behavior patterns and conscious motivations.

Legend has it that it all began in 1919, when young American psychologist Gordon Allport paid a visit to none other than Freud himself. Allport was telling Freud about his journey there on the train, and how there was this little boy who was obsessed with staying clean and didn't want to sit next to anyone or touch anything. Allport wondered if the boy's mother had a kind of dirt phobia that had rubbed off on him. So yadda yadda yadda, he's telling his tale, and at the end of it Freud looks at him and says, "Mhmm.. Was that little boy you?" Allport was basically like, "No, man, that was just some kid on the train. Don't try to make this into some big unconscious episode from my repressed childhood".

Allport thought Freud was digging a little too deep, and that sometimes you just need to look at motives in the present, not the past, to describe behavior. So Allport started his own club, describing personality in terms of fundamental traits, or characteristic behaviors and conscious motives. He wasn't so much interested in explaining traits as he was in describing them. Modern trait researchers like Robert McCrae and Paul Costa have since organized our fundamental characteristics into what's casually known as The Big Five: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, which you can remember using the mnemonic OCEAN, or CANOE, whichever one you prefer. Each of these traits exist on a spectrum, so, for example, your level of openness can range, on one end, from being totally open to new things and variety, or wanting strict, regular routine on the other end. Your degree of conscientiousness can translate into being impulsive and careless, or careful and disciplined. Someone high on the extroversion end will be sociable, while those on the low end will be shy and reserved. A very agreeable person, meanwhile, is helpful and trusting, while someone at the opposite end may be suspicious or uncooperative. And finally, on the neuroticism spectrum, an emotionally stable person will be calm and secure, while a less stable person is often anxious, insecure, and self-pitying.

The important idea here is that these traits are hypothesized to predict behavior and attitude. Like an introvert might prefer communicating through e-mail more than an extrovert, and an agreeable person is much more likely to help their neighbor move that couch than a suspicious one who's just glaring through the window. By adulthood, trait theorists will tell you these characteristics are pretty stable, but it isn't to say that they can't flex a little in different situations. Like that same shy person might end up singing Elvis karaoke in a room full of people under the right conditions. So our personality traits are better at predicting our average behavior that what we'd do in any specific situation, and research indicates that some traits, like neuroticism, seem to be better predictors of behavior than others.

This flexibility that we all seem to have leads to the fourth major theory on personality, the social cognitive perspective. Originally proposed by our Bobo-beating friend Alfred Bandura, the social cognitive school emphasizes the interaction between our traits and their social context. Bandura noted that we learn a lot of our behavior by watching and imitating others. That's the social part of the equation. But we also think a lot about how these social interactions affect our behavior, which is the cognitive part. So, in this way, people and their situations basically work together to create behavior. Bandura referred to this sort of interplay as reciprocal determinism. Meaning, that for example, the kind of books you read or music you listen to or friends you hang out with say something about your personality, because different people choose to be in different environments, and then those environments in turn continue to reinforce our personalities.

So if Bernice has a kind of anxious-suspicious personality, and she has a serious, titanic crush on Sherlock Holmes, she might be extra attuned to potentially dangerous or fishy situations. But the more

she sees the world in that way, the more anxious and suspicious she gets. In this way, we're both the creators and the products of the situations we surround ourselves with.

That's why one of the key indicators of personality in this school of thought has to do with our sense of personal control -- that is, the extent to which you perceive that you have control over your environment. Someone who believes that they control their own fate, or make their own luck, is said to have an internal locus of control, while those who feel like they're just guided by forces beyond their control are said to have an external locus. Now whether we're talking about control versus helplessness, introversion versus extroversion, calm versus anxious, or whatever, each of these different personality perspectives have their own methods of testing and measuring personality. We've talked before about how the psychoanalyst super-hunk Hermann Rorschach used his inkblot test to infer information about a person's personality; we know that Freud used dream analysis, and both he and Young were both fans of free association, but the broader school of theorists, now known as the psycho-dynamic camp that descended from Freud and pals, also use other projective psychological tests, including the famous thematic apperception test.

In this kind of test, you'd be presented with evocative but ambiguous pictures, and then asked to provide information about them. You might be asked to tell a story about the scenes, considering things like how are the characters feeling, or what's going on, or what happened before this event and what will happen after. Like check it out, is the woman crying because her brother just died, or from a bee sting? Or is she a maid laughing because some royal just passed out drunk on his bed, or perhaps the object of her long-burning affection has just confessed his love in a fever haze all Jane Austen-style and she's having a mini-breakdown in the hall?! The idea is that your responses will reveal something about your concerns and motivations in real life, or how you see the world, or about your unconscious processes that drive you.

By contrast with that approach, though, modern trait personality researchers believe that you can assess personality traits by having people answer a series of test questions. There are lots of so-called personality trait inventories out there. Some provide a quick reading on a particular enduring trait, like anxiety or self-esteem, while other gauge a wide range of traits, like our friends The Big Five. These tests, like the Myers-Briggs, which you might have heard of, involve long questionnaires of true-false or agree-disagree questions like, "Do you enjoy being the center of attention?", "Do you find it easy to empathize with others?", or "Do you value justice over mercy?" But the classic Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory is probably the most widely used personality test. The most recent version asks a series of five hundred and sixty-seven true-false questions, varying from "No one seems to understand me" to "I like mechanics magazines" to "I loved my father", and is often used to identify emotional disorders.

Then there's how Bandura's social cognitive camp sizes you up. Because this school of thought emphasizes the interaction of environment and behavior rather than just traits alone, they aren't solely into questions and answers. Instead, they might measure personality in different contexts, understanding behavior in one situation is best predicted by how you acted in a similar situation. Like, if Bernice freaked out and tried to hide under the bed during the last five thunderstorms, we can predict that she will do that again next time. And if we conducted a controlled lab experiment where we, say, we looked at the effects of thunderstorm noises on people's behavior, we might get an even better sense of what baseline psychological factors could best predict storm-induced freak-outs.

And finally, there are the Humanistic theorists like Maslow. They often reject standardized assessments altogether. Instead, they tend to measure your self-concept through therapy, interviews, and questionnaires that ask subjects to describe both how they would ideally like to be and how they actually are. The idea is that the closer the actual and ideal are, the more positive the subject's sense of self.

Which brings us back to that biggest mother-lode question of them all: Who, or what, is the self?

All the books out there about self-esteem, self-help, self-awareness, self-control, and so on are built upon one assumption: that the self is the organizer of our thoughts and feelings and actions: essentially the center of a personality. But of course, it's a sticky issue. One way to think about self is through the concept of possible selves, like your ideal self, perhaps devastatingly attractive and intelligent, successful, and well-loved, as well as your most feared self, the one who could end up unemployed and lonely and rundown. This balance of potential best and worst selves motivates us through life. In the end, once you factor in environment and childhood experiences, culture and all that mess, not to mention biology which we haven't even touched on today, can we really firmly define self? Or answer certainly that we even have one? That, my friend, is one of life's biggest questions, and so far it has yet to be universally answered.

But you learned a lot anyway today, right? As we talked about the trait and social cognitive perspectives, and also about different ways these schools and others measure and test personality. We also talked about what self is, and how our self-esteem works. Thanks for watching, especially to our Subbable subscribers who make Crash Course possible. To find out how you can become a supporter, just go to subbable.com/crashcourse. This episode was written by Kathleen Yale, edited by Blake de Pastino, and our consultant is Dr. Ranjit Bhagwat. Our director and editor is Nicholas Jenkins, and the script supervisor is Michael Aranda, who is also our sound designer, and the graphics team is Thought Cafe.