

PERSONALITY THEORIES

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This is an electronic textbook ("e-text") created for undergraduate and graduate courses in Personality Theories. While it is copyrighted, you may download it or print it out without permission from the author, as long as the material is used only for personal or educational purposes, and the source is indicated. I hope you enjoy the chapters!

To read about my own personality theory, see [Perspectives Theory](#) and [Seven Perspectives](#).

Dr. H. Berryman Edwards offers the [BehaveNet Clinical Capsules](#): Notable figures in behavioral health care, which include good readings lists as well as therapists not covered here.

Brent Dean Robbins has created a wonderful collection of essays on significant [psychoanalytic](#) and [existential-phenomenological](#) theorists, therapists, and writers.

Finally, for access to tons of personality research and theory, visit Dr. William Revelle's [Personality Project](#) and Dr. Scott Acton's [Great Ideas in Personality](#).

I hope you enjoy the readings.
If you have any comments or questions,
please feel free to contact me at
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to "Theories of Personality!"

This course and "e-text" will examine a number of theories of personality, from Sigmund Freud's famous psychoanalysis to Viktor Frankl's logotherapy. It will include biographies, basic terms and concepts, assessment methods and therapies, discussions and anecdotes, and references for further reading.

Some of you may find the area a bit confusing. First, many people ask "who's right." Unfortunately, this aspect of psychology is the least amenable to direct research that pits one theory against another. Much of it involves things that are only accessible to the person him- or herself – your inner thoughts and feelings. Some of it is thought not to be available even to the person – your instincts and unconscious motivations. In other words, personality is still very much in a "pre-scientific" or philosophical stage, and some aspects may well always remain that way.

Another thing that throws some people about personality theories is that they come into it thinking it's the easiest topic of all, and that everyone – especially they themselves – already knows all the answers. Well, it's true that personality theories doesn't involve all the higher math and symbolic systems that physics and chemistry (the famously "tough" courses!) involve. And it's true that we all have pretty direct access to our own thoughts and feelings, and plenty of experience dealing with people. But we are mistaking familiarity with knowledge, and in much of what we think we know turns out to be prejudices and biases we've picked up over the years. In fact, the topic of theories of personality is probably one of the most difficult and most complex we ever deal with.

So, at present, we are stuck with theories (plural) rather than the science of personality. As we go through the various theories, however, there will be ones that fit well with your experiences of self and other – that tends to be a good sign. And there will be times that several theorists say similar things, even though they are taking very different approaches – that, too, is a good sign. And once in a blue moon there is a research program that supports certain ideas over others – that's a very good sign.

What makes personality theories so interesting, I think, is that we can actually participate in the process. You don't need labs and federal funding, just a bit of intelligence, some motivation, and an open mind.

Theory

It might be nice to start off with a definition of theories of personality. First, theory: A theory is a model of reality that helps us to understand, explain, predict, and control that reality. In the study of personality, these models are usually verbal. Every now and then, someone comes up with a graphic model, with symbolic illustrations, or a mathematical model, or even a computer model. But words are the basic form.

Different approaches focus on different aspects of theory. Humanists and Existentialists tend to focus on the understanding part. They believe that much of what we are is way too complex and embedded in history and culture to "predict and control." Besides, they suggest, predicting and controlling people is, to a considerable extent, unethical. Behaviorists and Freudians, on the other hand, prefer to discuss prediction and control. If an idea is useful, if it works, go with it! Understanding, to them, is secondary.

Another definition says that a theory is a guide to action: We figure that the future will be something like the past. We figure that certain sequences and patterns of events that have occurred frequently before are likely to occur again. So we look to the first events of a sequence, or the most vivid parts of a pattern, to serve as our landmarks and warning signals. A theory is a little like a map: It isn't the same as the countryside it describes; it certainly doesn't give you every detail; it may not even be terribly accurate. But it does provide a

guide to action – and gives us something to correct when it fails.

Personality

Usually when we talk about someone's personality, we are talking about what makes that person different from other people, perhaps even unique. This aspect of personality is called **individual differences**. For some theories, it is the central issue. These theories often spend considerable attention on things like types and traits and tests with which we can categorize or compare people: Some people are neurotic, others are not; some people are more introverted, others more extroverted; and so on.

However, personality theorists are just as interested in the **commonalities** among people. What, for example, does the neurotic person and the healthy person have in common? Or what is the common structure in people that expresses itself as introversion in some and extroversion in others?

If you place people on some dimension – such as healthy-neurotic or introversion-extroversion – you are saying that the dimension is something everyone can be placed on. Whether they are neurotic or not, all people have a capacity for health and ill-health; and whether introverted or extroverted, all are "verted" one way or the other.

Another way of saying this is that personality theorists are interested in the structure of the individual, the psychological structure in particular. How are people "put together;" how do they "work;" how do they "fall apart."

Some theorists go a step further and say they are looking for the essence of being a person. Or they say they are looking for what it means to be an individual human being. The field of personality psychology stretches from a fairly simple empirical search for differences between people to a rather philosophical search for the meaning of life!

Perhaps it is just pride, but personality psychologists like to think of their field as a sort of umbrella for all the rest of psychology. We are, after all, concerned about genetics and physiology, about learning and development, about social interaction and culture, about pathology and therapy. All these things come together in the individual.

Pitfalls

There are quite a few things that can go wrong with a theory, and you should keep your eyes open for them. This applies, of course, even to the theories created by the great minds we'll be looking at. Even Sigmund Freud put his pants on one leg at a time! On the other hand, it is even more important when we develop our own theories about people and their personalities. Here are a few things to look out for:

Ethnocentrism

Everyone grows up in a culture that existed before their birth. It influences us so subtly and so thoroughly that we grow up thinking "this is the way things are," rather than "this is the ways things are in this particular society." Erich Fromm, one of the people we will look at, calls this the social unconscious, and it is very powerful.

So, for example, Sigmund Freud grew up in Vienna, not New York or Tokyo. He was born in 1856, not 1756, not 1956. There were things that had to have influenced him, and so his theorizing, that would be

different for us.

The peculiarities of a culture can sometimes be most easily seen by asking "what does everybody talk about?" and "what does nobody talk about?" In Europe, during the last half of the 1800's, especially in the middle and upper classes, people just didn't talk about sex much. It was, more or less "taboo."

Women weren't supposed to show their ankles, much less their thighs, and even the legs on a piano were referred to as "limbs," so as not to unnecessarily arouse anyone! It was not uncommon for a doctor to make a housecall to a newlywed couple to help revive the bride, who had never been told the nature of the activity they were to engage in on their wedding night, and had fainted dead-away at the prospect! Slightly different from today, wouldn't you say?

Freud has to be commended, by the way, on his ability to rise above his culture in this instance. He saw how strange it was to pretend that people (especially women) were not sexual creatures. Much of our present openness about sex (for better or for worse) derives from Freud's original insights.

Today, most people aren't mortified by their sexual natures. In fact, we have a tendency to talk about our sexuality all the time, to anyone who will listen! Sex is plastered on our billboards, broadcast on our televisions, a part of the lyrics of our favorite songs, in our movies, our magazines, our books, and, of course, here on the internet! This is something peculiar about our culture, and we are so used to it, we hardly notice anymore.

On the other hand, Freud was misled by his culture into thinking that neurosis always has a sexual root. In our society, we have more problems with feeling useless and fearing aging and death. Freud's society took death for granted, considered aging a sign of maturity, and had a place for nearly everybody.

Egocentrism

Another potential pitfall in theorizing is the peculiarities of the theorist as an individual. Each of us, beyond our culture, has specific details to his or her life – genetics, family structure and dynamics, special experiences, education, and so on – that affect the way we think and feel and, ultimately, the way we interpret personality.

Freud, for example, was the first of seven children (though he had two half brothers who had kids of their own before Sigmund was born). His mother was a strong personality and 20 years younger than his father, and she was particularly attached to her "Siggie." Freud was a genius (we can't all make that claim!). He was Jewish, although neither he nor his father ever practiced their religion. And so on....

It is quite likely that the patriarchal family structure he experienced as well as the close ties he had with his mother directed his attention to those kinds of issues when it came time for him to formulate his theory. His pessimistic nature and atheistic beliefs led him to view human life as rather survivalistic and requiring strong social control. You, too, have your peculiarities, and they will color your interests and understanding, often without your awareness.

Dogmatism

A third pitfall is dogmatism. We as human beings seem to have a natural conservative tendency: We stick to what has worked in the past. And if we devote our lives to developing a personality theory, if we have poured our heart into it, you can bet we will be very defensive (to use Freud's term) about it.

Dogmatic people don't allow for questions, doubts, new information, and so on. You can tell when you are dealing with dogmatic people by looking at how they deal with their critics: They will tend to make use of what is called the circular argument.

A circular argument is one where you "prove" your point by assuming things that would only be true if your point were true in the first place. There are tons of examples of circular arguments because everyone seems

to use them. A simple example: "I know everything!" Why should I believe you? "Because I know everything!"

Another example (one I've actually experienced): "You have to believe in God because the Bible says so, and the Bible is the word of God!" Now understand that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with saying that God exists, and neither is there anything intrinsically wrong with believing that the Bible is the word of God. Where this person goes wrong is using the point "the Bible is the word of God" to support the contention that "you have to believe in God," since the non-believer is hardly going to be impressed with the one if he doesn't believe in the other!

Well, this kind of thing happens all the time in psychology, and in personality theories in particular. To pick on Freud again, it is not unusual to hear Freudians argue that people who don't accept Freud's ideas are repressing the evidence they would need to believe in Freud – when the idea of repression is in fact a Freudian concept to begin with. What you need, they might suggest, is a few years of Freudian analysis to understand that Freud was right – when, of course, you would hardly spend all that time (and money) on something you don't believe in to begin with!

So if you run into a theory that dismisses your objections or questions, beware!

Misunderstandings

Another problem, or set of problems, is unintended implications: It seems that every time you say something, you let loose words that are susceptible to 100's of different interpretations. To put it simply, people will often misunderstand you.

There are several things that make misunderstandings more likely.

1. **Translation.** Freud, Jung, Binswanger, and several others, wrote in German. When they were translated, some of their concepts were "twisted" a little – something quite natural, since every language has its own idiosyncrasies.

Freud's id, ego, and superego, which you've all heard of, are words used by his translators. The original terms were es, ich, and überich, which are German for it, I, and over-I. They are, in other words, ordinary words, simple words. In translation, they were turned into Latin words, words that sounded vaguely scientific, because the translators felt that American readers would be more accepting of Freud if he sounded a little more scientific, instead of poetic (which is what he sounds like in German!).

Of course that means we "hear" Freud as making scientific statements, cutting up the psyche into clear compartments, when in fact he was speaking more metaphorically, and was suggesting that they shade into each other.

2. **Neologisms.** Neologisms means new words. When we develop a theory, we may have concepts that have not had names before, and we find or create words to name them. Sometimes we use Greek or Latin, sometimes we use combinations of old words (as in German), sometimes we use phrases (as in French), sometimes we just take an old word and use it in a new way: anticathexis, Gemeinschaftsgefühl, être-en-soi, and self, for examples.

It doesn't take much explaining to see how a word like self or anxiety or ego has hundreds of different meanings, depending on the theorist!

3. **Metaphors.** Metaphors (or similes, more exactly) are words or phrases that, while not literally true, somehow capture some aspect of the truth. Every theorist uses models of the human personality in one form or another, but it would be a mistake to confuse the model – the metaphor – for the real thing!

A good example is the common present-day use of the computer and information-processing in general as a metaphor for human functioning. Do we work something like computers? Yes, in fact, several aspects of our functioning work like that. Are we computers? No, of course not. The metaphor fails in the long run. But it is useful, and that's how we have to view them. It's like a map: It helps you find your way, but you'd hardly confuse it with the territory itself!

Evidence

Evidence, or rather the lack of evidence, is of course another problem. What kind of support do you have for your theory? Or was it something you dreamed up while on a hallucinogenic? There are several kinds of evidence: Anecdotal, clinical, phenomenological, correlational, and experimental.

1. **Anecdotal evidence** is the casual kind of evidence, usually given in story form: "I remember when...", and "I heard that...", for example. It is, of course, notoriously inaccurate. It is best to use this kind of evidence only as a motivation for further research.

2. **Clinical evidence** is evidence gathered from therapy sessions. It is more carefully recorded by people with considerable training. Its major weakness is that it tends to be highly individual and even unusual, because you are describing a person who is almost by definition an unusual individual! Clinical evidence does provide the foundation of most of the theories we will look at, although most follow up with further research.

3. **Phenomenological evidence** is the result of careful observation of people in various circumstances, as well as introspection involving one's own psychological processes. Many of the theorists we will look at have done phenomenological research, either formally or informally. It requires considerable training as well as a certain natural ability. Its weakness is that we have a hard time telling whether the researcher has done a good job.

4. **Correlational research** in personality usually involves the creation and use of personality tests. The scores from these tests are compared with other measurable aspects of life, as well as with other tests. So we might create a test for shyness (introversion), and compare it with the scores on intelligence tests or with ratings of job satisfaction. Unfortunately, measuring things doesn't tell you how they work or even if they are real, and many things resist measurement altogether.

5. **Experimental research** is the most controlled and precise form of research, and, if the issues you are concerned with are amenable to experimentation, it is the preferred method. Experimentation, as you know, involves random selection of subjects, careful control of conditions, great concern to avoid undue influence, and usually measurement and statistics. Its weakness is that it has a hard time getting at many of the issues personality theorists are most interested in. How do you control or measure things like love, anger, or awareness?

Philosophical assumptions

That people – even famous geniuses – make mistakes should not have been a big surprise to you. It should also not surprise you that people are limited. There are many questions, ones we need to have answers to in order to build our theories, that have no answer. Some are just beyond us presently; some may never have an answer. But we answer them anyway, because we need to get on with life. We can call these our philosophical assumptions.

1. **Free will vs. determinism.** Are we and the world completely determined? Is the sense that we make choices just an illusion? Or is it the other way around, that the spirit has the potential to rise above all restraints, that it is determinism which is an illusion?

Most theorists make more moderate assumptions. A moderate determinist position might say that, although we are ultimately determined, we are capable of participating in that determinism. A moderate free-will position might say that freedom is intrinsic to our nature, but we must live out that nature in an otherwise determined world.

2. **Uniqueness vs. universality.** Is each person unique, or will we eventually discover universal laws which will explain all of human behavior? Again, more moderate positions are available: Perhaps there are broad rules of human nature with room for individual variation within them; Or perhaps individuality outweighs our commonalities.

I am sure you can see how this assumption relates to the previous one: Determinism suggests the possibility of universal laws, while free will is one possible source of uniqueness. But the relationship is not perfect, and in the moderate versions quite complex.

3. **Physiological vs. purposive motivation.** Are we more "pushed" by basic physiological needs, such as the need for food, water, and sexual activity? Or are we more "pulled" by our purposes, goals, values, principles, and so on? More moderate possibilities include the idea that purposive behavior is powerful but grows out of physiological needs, or simply that both types of motivation are important, perhaps at different times and places.

A more philosophical version of this contrasts causality and teleology. The first says that your state of mind now is determined by prior events; The second says that it is determined by its orientation to the future. The causality position is by far the more common in psychology generally, but the teleological position is very strong in personality psychology.

4. **Conscious vs. unconscious motivation.** Is much, most, or even all of our behavior and experience determined by unconscious forces, i.e. forces of which we are not aware? Or is some, little, or even none determined by unconscious forces. Or, to put it another way, how much of what determines our behavior are we conscious of?

This might be an answerable question, but consciousness and unconsciousness are slippery things. For example, if we were aware of something a moment ago, and it has changed us in some way, but we are now unable to bring it to awareness, are we consciously motivated or unconsciously? Or if we deny some truth, keeping it from awareness, must we not have seen it coming in order to take that action to begin with?

5. **Nature vs. nurture.** This is another question that may someday be answerable: To what degree is what we are due to our genetic inheritance ("nature") or to our upbringing and other experiences ("nurture")? The question is such a difficult one because nature and nurture do not exist independently of each other. Both a

body and experience are probably essential to being a person, and it is very difficult to separate their effects.

As you will see, the issue comes up in many forms, including the possible existence of instincts in human beings and the nature of temperament, genetically based personality characteristics. It is also very debatable whether "nature" (as in human nature) even refers to genetics.

6. Stage vs. non-stage theories of development. One aspect of the nature-nurture issue that is very important to personality psychology is whether or not we all pass through predetermined stages of development. We do, after all, go through certain stages of physiological development – fetal, childhood, puberty, adulthood, senescence – powerfully controlled by genetics. Shouldn't we expect the same for psychological development?

We will see a full range of positions on this issue, from true stage theories such as Freud's, who saw stages as universal and fairly clearly marked, to behaviorist and humanist theories that consider what appear to be stages to be artifacts created by certain patterns of upbringing and culture.

7. Cultural determinism vs. cultural transcendence. To what extent do our cultures mold us? Totally, or are we capable of "rising above" (transcending) those influences? And if so, how easy or difficult is it? Notice that this is not quite the same as the determinism-free will issue: If we are not determined by culture, our "transcendence" may be nothing more than some other determinism, by physiological needs, for example, or genetics.

Another way to look at the issue is to ask yourself, "How difficult is it to really get to know someone from a different culture?" If it is difficult to step out of our cultures and communicate as human beings, then perhaps culture is terribly determining of who we are. If it is relatively easy, perhaps it is not so powerful.

8. Early or late personality formation. Are our personality characteristics established in early childhood, to remain relatively fixed through the rest of our lives? Or are we every bit as flexible in adulthood? Or is that, although change is always a possibility, it just gets increasingly difficult as time goes on?

This question is intimately tied up with the issues of genetics, stages, and cultural determination, as you can imagine. The biggest hurdle we face before we find a resolution, however, is in specifying what we mean by personality characteristics. If we mean things that never change from the moment of birth – i.e. temperament – then of course personality is formed early. If we mean our beliefs, opinions, habits, and so on, these can change rather dramatically up to the moment of death. Since most theorists mean something "in between" these extremes, the answer is likewise to be found "in between."

9. Continuous vs. discontinuous understanding of mental illness. Is mental illness just a matter of degree? Are they just ordinary people that have taken something to an extreme? Are they perhaps eccentrics that disturb themselves or us? Or is there a qualitative difference in the way they experience reality? As with cultures, is it easy to understand the mentally ill, or do we live in separate worlds?

This issue may be resolvable, but it is complicated by the fact that mental illness is hardly a single entity. There are many different kinds. Some would say there are as many as there are people who are mentally ill. What is a mental illness and what is not is even up for debate. It may be that mental health is also not a single thing.

10. Optimism vs. pessimism. Last, we return to an issue that is, I believe, not at all resolvable: Are human beings basically good or basically bad; Should we be hopeful about our prospects, or discouraged; Do we need a lot of help, or would we be better off if left alone?

This is, obviously, a more philosophical, religious, or personal issue. Yet it is perhaps the most influential of all. The attitude determines what you see when you look at humanity; What you see in turn influences the attitude. And it is bound up with other issues: If, for example, mental illness is not so far from health, if personality can be changed later in life, if culture and genetics aren't too powerful, and if our motivations can at least be made conscious, we have more grounds for optimism. The theorists we will look at were at least optimistic enough to make the effort at understanding human nature.

Organization

With all the different pitfalls, assumptions, and methods, you might think that there is very little we can do in terms of organizing "theories of personality." Fortunately, people with like minds tend to be drawn to each other. Three broad orientations tend to stand out:

1. **Psychoanalytic** or "first force." Although psychoanalytic strictly speaking refers to Freudians, we will use it here to refer to others who have been strongly influenced by Freud and who – though they may disagree with nearly everything else – do share attitude: They tend to believe that the answers to the important questions lie somewhere behind the surface, hidden, in the unconscious.

This book will look at three versions of this approach. The first is the Freudian view proper, which includes Sigmund and Anna Freud, of course, and the ego psychologist, of whom Erik Erikson is the best known.

The second might be called the transpersonal perspective, which has a much more spiritual streak, and which will be represented here by Carl Jung.

The third has been called the social psychological view, and includes Alfred Adler, Karen Horney, and Erich Fromm.

2. **Behavioristic** or "second force." In this perspective, the answers are felt to lie in careful observation of behavior and environment and their relations. Behaviorists, as well as their modern descendants the cognitivists, prefer quantitative and experimental methods.

The behavioristic approach will be represented here by Hans Eysenck, B. F. Skinner, and Albert Bandura.

3. **Humanistic** or "third force." The humanistic approach, which is usually thought of as including existential psychology, is the most recent of the three. Often based on a reaction to psychoanalytic and behavioristic theories, the common belief is that the answers are to be found in consciousness or experience. Phenomenological methods are preferred by most humanists.

We will examine two "streams" of the humanistic approach. The first is humanism proper, represented by Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and George Kelly.

The second is existentialist psychology, a philosophy-based humanism quite popular in Europe and Latin America. We will look at two existential psychologists, Ludwig Binswanger and Viktor Frankl.

If you examine the table of contents, you will notice that there are chapters on other theorists available as well. For charts of the relationships among theories and theorists,

[<http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgboree/orientations.html>]

Resources

In addition to the primary sources mentioned within the text itself, I am indebted to several secondary sources as well:

William B. Arndt, Jr. *Theories of Personality*. NY: Macmillan, 1974.

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All errors are, of course, mine.