

## **Who are You Really? Understanding Personality<sup>1</sup>**

The term 'personality' is used quite frequently in everyday conversation. For example, when MBA aspirants talk of 'developing' their personality for group discussion and interviews in entrance exams, when working people complain about their co-workers, when product development and marketing teams ponder over who their target customer might be, etc. If one probes the issue of personality more deeply, one gets a range of views on what the term 'personality' means. These include – it is something inherent in the person, it can explain why they make particular type of decisions, it appears in the form of a thematic recurrence within an individual's lifetime, knowledge about someone's personality can help predict his/her reaction pattern when faced with particular circumstances, etc. This hand-out discusses the following aspects with respect to personality – its definition, the psychological theories concerning it, the Big Five Model of personality and its constituents, and the physiological underpinnings of personality that have been studied by personality theorists. It is expected that the hand-out will open the doors to this fascinating area of scientific inquiry for the curious reader.

### **2. What is Personality?**

The word 'personality' comes from the Greek word 'persona' which means 'mask'. Personality has been studied by psychologists for long and a number of definitions of personality have been proposed. Gordon Allport (1961) defined personality as a dynamic organisation within the individual of those psychological systems that determine his unique adjustment to his environment. By 'psychological systems', Allport was referring to such phenomena as attitudes, habits, opinions, abilities within an individual. Warren & Carmichel (1960) stated that personality is the entire mental organisation of a human being at any stage of his development and embraces every phase of human character. By 'human character', they refer to intellect, temperament, skill, morality and other attitudes that build an individual in the course of life. Eysenck (1971) has characterised personality as the sum total of actual or potential behaviour patterns. Further, he has stated that personality is a relatively enduring organisation

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of a person's character, temperament, intellect and physique, which determines his unique adjustment to his environment. Fredenburg (1971) has stated that personality is 'a stable system of complex characteristics by which the life pattern of an individual may be identified' (p:8). Cattell (1950) posited that personality is 'that which permits a prediction of what a person will do in a given situation' (p:2-3).

These definitions represent a number of perspectives and unique insights that theorists had on the subject of 'personality'. However, a few salient points about 'personality' emerge:

- It is related to the internal, mental part of a person
- It embraces every aspect of human character
- It is relatively enduring in nature
- It is related to behavior and can be discerned through observations
- It is like a sum total of potential behaviors
- It represents a unique adjustment to one's environment
- It is something which can help identify an individual

### **3. Theories on Personality**

A number of theories have emerged which attempt to explain the phenomenon of 'personality'. The major theories are briefly discussed below:

- *Behavioral Theories*: These hold that personality is a result of interaction between the individual and the environment. The focus of study of psychologists from this school is – 'observable and measurable behaviors'. They reject theories that take internal thoughts, moods, and feelings as important on the ground that these cannot be measured. B. F. Skinner and John B. Watson are important psychologists of this school of thought.
- *Psychodynamic Theories* – According to these theories, personality is influenced heavily by the unconscious mind and childhood experiences. The most prominent psychologist of the school was Freud, who conceptualized the 'self' to consist of Id, Ego and Superego. The 'Id' is responsible for needs and urges, while the superego regulates ideals and morals. The 'ego' moderates the demands of the id, superego, and the reality. Erik Ericson is another well-known psychologist of this school.

- *Humanist Theories* – According to these theories, there is heavy influence of individual experience on personality and an individual's free will is of great importance. Their essential argument is that there is an innate need for personal growth in human beings and this is what can motivate behavior. Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow are the important psychologists in this school of thought.
- *Trait Theories*- According to these theories, personality is made up of a number of broad traits. The Big Five Theory of personality is based on the trait theories. This idea discussed further in this hand out.

#### **4. Trait**

Cattell characterised a trait as a mental structure or an inference made from observed behaviour which accounts for the regularity or consistency in someone's behaviour. Traits constitute the fundamental units of one's personality. Traits predispose one to act in a certain way, regardless of the situation. This implies that traits are consistent across situations and over time for an individual, but they may vary between individuals. Further, psychologists hold that essentially the same traits are present in all individuals, though in different degrees. Thus, each trait may be thought of as a continuum along which individuals vary. For instance, 'nervousness' is a trait on which individuals may vary from 'never nervous at all' at one extreme to 'often severely nervous'. The idea is analogous to the observation that each individual has the characteristics of height and weight but the exact magnitude (for height or weight) is different for different individuals. It is believed that in a major way, the traits are dependent on individuals' nervous systems, which in turn, are determined by genetic factors.

#### **5. The Big Five Theory of Personality**

Although personality had been an important area of scientific inquiry for long, it suffered from a lack of coherence. This was so because different studies attempted to explain and measure it in terms of different constructs, which had led to a bewildering number of different theories with seemingly no connection to each other. In fact, Gordon Allport, an eminent personality psychologist, had commented that each expert had his own pet units and pet set of diagnostic devices. Later on, the emergence of the Big Five model of personality was able to encompass the disparate approaches; it

emerged as a comprehensive framework for studying personality. Costa & McCrae, two psychologists deeply associated with it, stated that this model was similar to a Christmas tree on which all the specific findings of different personality psychologists could be decorated.

The Big Five Model of personality, also known as the Five Factor Model of personality, posits that personality can be understood in terms of five traits (or dimensions), which are **O**penness, **C**onscientiousness, **E**xtraversion, **A**greeableness and **N**euroticism (for which the acronym **OCEAN** or **CANOE** are used). These individual dimensions are discussed separately in Section 7.

## **6. Origin and Development of the Big Five Model**

The Big Five Model emerged from a line of research in personality psychology which is called the *lexical approach*. This work consisted of identifying and extracting all personality-relevant words from the dictionary (lexicon) in the belief that most of the socially relevant and salient personality characteristics have become encoded in natural language over the ages. Thus, if such words could be identified, it would constitute a set of words that is finite, extensive and relevant. Perhaps the first such work was undertaken by Baumgarten (1933) who worked in the German language. In English, Allport and Odbert (1936) were the first psychologists who undertook this arduous task, which yielded around 18,000 words. This set of words was truly unwieldy and so the focus shifted to developing a taxonomy, or a framework, which could help bring some order to the mass of words. It would help in distinguishing, ordering and naming individual differences in people's behaviour and experience.

Thereafter, for the next sixty years, arriving at a justifiable taxonomy is what personality psychologists busied themselves with. Norman (1967) suggested that the words extracted must be classified into mutually exclusive categories. A statistical technique called 'factor analysis' was then pressed into service by Raymond Cattell (1970), who was finally able to identify 12 distinct 'personality factors'. This became the basis for his 16PF questionnaire, one of the pioneering personality identification tools. However, further refinements by a number of psychologists, such as Takemoto-Chock (1981) led to the Big Five Model, which recognises only five personality dimensions.

Modern work in this field is benefitting enormously from various scientific innovations, such as (Nettle, 2007):

- Neuro-scientific techniques such as PET (Positron Emission Tomography) scanning and fMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging), which allow researchers to look at the structure and functions of the human brain in normal individuals, without recourse to surgical or invasive procedures
- Genetics and genomics, wherein modern techniques have enabled the sequencing of the human genome and gain new insight into people's mental selves
- Diffusion of evolutionary thinking in the domain of psychology, which is enabling better understanding of phenomena such as natural selection and the persistence of variation even in the sphere of personality.

To be sure, the Big Five Model was not derived from neuroscience, genetics or evolutionary thinking, but many personality psychologists express confidence that these techniques will eventually end up validating the model, and taking it further.

## **7. Dimensions of Personality according to the Big Five Model of Personality**

### *#1 – Conscientiousness*

This dimension is concerned with the propensity to exercise control over one's impulses. There is a continuum from very high predisposition to control impulses to a predisposition towards spontaneity. The former set is disciplined, organised and self-controlled while the latter is impulsive, free-spirited and may have a certain weakness of the will.

Scientific research has revealed that there are certain brain mechanisms (associated with the frontal lobes) that have the ability to inhibit response to the environment, even if it is rewarding, in favour of some other objective or value that the individual holds as important. How strong these brain mechanisms are in an individual can determine where he/she measures on the Conscientiousness scale.

In general, high levels of conscientiousness are associated with law-abidingness, avoidance of addictions, career success and longer life-span. Environments which are stable and predictable allow conscientious people to flourish. However, conscientiousness to an extreme degree results in a condition called Obsessive

Compulsive Personality Disorder (OCPD), wherein the person is preoccupied with orderliness, perfectionism, and mental and inter-personal control, which leads to compromises in flexibility, openness and efficiency. When the environment is dynamic or unpredictable, spontaneous people tend to thrive and succeed.

## *#2 – Agreeableness*

This dimension is concerned with the propensity to ‘mentalise’ and ‘empathise’ with others. There is a continuum from very high predisposition to empathise to a predisposition towards indifference or even hostility. The former tend to be trusting and cooperative while the latter can be cold-hearted, non-compliant and hostile.

A board set of mechanisms in the mind, called ‘theory of the mind’ enables human beings to appreciate the mental state of another individual. This, in turn, has two capacities – mentalising and empathising. Mentalising is attributing a mental state to another person (e.g. He/she is dissatisfied/anxious/angry/frustrated, etc.). Empathising is also about representing the mental state of others, but with emphasis on emotion. Research in the field of neuroscience has shown that brain areas that are activated when actually undergoing some emotion at first hand are also activated in people who are empathetic.

Agreeable people have harmonious inter-personal relationships and avoid falling out with or insulting other people. People on the opposite end of the spectrum tend to be cold or even antagonistic.

Extremely high levels of agreeableness result in a condition called ‘dependent personality disorder’ wherein the individual completely sacrifices own needs, pleasures and values for the sake of the other. On the other hand, people with extremely low agreeableness suffer from ‘psychopathy’. They tend to be totally egocentric, dishonest, unloving and remorseless users of other people.

## *#3 – Neuroticism*

This dimension is concerned with the propensity to respond to negative emotion systems of the mind. Negative emotions are deeply unpleasant to experience. Examples include fear, anxiety, shame, guilt, disgust, sadness, etc. These negative emotions have their own uses – they ‘teach’ us to avoid certain situations which may

not be healthy for us in the evolutionary sense (e.g. attack from predators, abandonment by own family or tribe, etc.).

Research has revealed that this tendency is related to the degree of activation of brain mechanisms such as amygdala in the hippocampus, which helps suppress negative feelings. Several hormones are also important in this context, such as adrenaline, cortisol and serotonin.

People who have a high predisposition to respond to negative emotion systems tend to suffer from high levels of stress, anxiety and inability to trust whereas those with low predisposition tend to have the opposite tendencies. Extremely high neuroticism can lead to a number of serious psychological disorders such as clinical depression, phobias, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), etc. However, moderately high level of neuroticism can be helpful in terms of self-preservation, a desire to change things for the better as reformers or writers, a desire to work extra-hard so as to obviate failure, and a more level-headed prediction of the future state of affairs.

#### *#4 – Openness*

This dimension is concerned with an attitude of exploration and receptivity towards new experiences and approaches. It is also about the flair for and the production of imaginative and artistic endeavours. Here too, there is a continuum from very high openness to very low receptivity and exploration.

Scientific research has shown that a number of circuits associated with cognition in the frontal lobes of the brain are associated with openness. These are associated with intelligence also, but there is a subtle difference – openness is characterised by broad associations of meanings ('porous borders' between sensory domains such as sight and sound, smell and touch, etc.), restlessness unconventionality, supernatural beliefs and hallucinatory tendency.

People with high openness are known to be exploratory, innovative and unconventional while people at the opposite end tend to be mundane, conventional and grounded. Poets and artists tend to be high on openness. People with extremely high openness tend to develop the condition of schizophrenia or psychosis (e.g. hearing voices, being delusional, having hallucinations).

## *#5 – Extraversion*

This dimension is concerned with the propensity to respond to positive emotions. Extraverts have a lot of positive emotion – states of joy, desire, enthusiasm and excitement. At the opposite end are the introverts who, psychologically speaking, are aloof from the rewards of the world and this gives them great independence and solidity.

The terms extraversion and introversion were introduced by Carl Jung, one of the doyens of psychology, in 1921. At the time, extraversion referred to a tendency to focus outward, love of action over reflection, and preference to be outgoing and active. The opposite was the case with an introvert. Since then, however, the terms ‘extraversion’ and ‘introversion’ have undergone subtle changes as a result of advances in psychological research.

In the modern jargon, introversion is not a life uniquely responsive to negative emotions simply the relative absence of positive emotions such as joy and excitement.

Scientific research has shown that extraversion is strongly related to the hormone dopamine and its circuitry in the brain (especially, a gene called D4DR).

### **8. What Factors Influence Personality?**

Research has shown that at least 50% of personality is inherited, i.e. it is the genetic factors that influence them. However, the remaining part of personality is influenced by other ‘environmental’ factors.

Possible influencers such as style of parenting, early life experiences, family structure, schooling, friend-circle, birth order, etc. have been considered by psychologists. This field, however, is an evolving one and there is much to be discovered in the days and years to come. As an example, some studies on twins separated at birth and adopted by different families, have shown that parenting style has infinitesimally small influence on personality of the children, which caused quite a stir in the academic community. It is hoped that greater research will reveal more fascinating details in this area.

### **9. What can be Done?**

A natural question to ponder over is – how can one strive for personal growth, given what we know about personality? McAdams (1996) argues that an individual’s



psychological self can be classified into three levels – first, the *big five personality traits*; second, *characteristic behaviour patterns*; and third, *personal life story*.

Insofar as the Big Five personality traits are concerned, these depend heavily on genetics and other factors beyond an individual's own control (e.g. family structure, early childhood experiences, etc.). The second is concerned with the specific way in which a personality trait finds expression (e.g. one highly extraverted person may take to hang-gliding, another to war journalism, yet another to event management). The third is concerned with how an individual sees himself/herself – what is the narrative about self that he/she hold as true. A sense of purpose in life, of one's values, goals, significances, etc. derive from one's *personal life story*. This is why the same life event (e.g. loss of employment) may be viewed differently by different people.

With this construct in mind, the path to self-development can be constructed in a better way. With respect to the first level (personality traits), little can be done. However, in the second level, one can make important alterations, if the individual's personality is coming in the way of effectiveness. For instance, if low consciousness has led to someone becoming addicted to say, alcohol, then to come out of it, one may completely avoid bars and taverns as well as the company of friends with whom drinking is associated. Definitely, it is not easy because it involves employing the brain's conscious executive functions to overpower deep-seated, powerful personality traits. It is also exhausting, and there is not guarantee of success. However, it can be done. At the third level, the degree of freedom for the individual is even more than at the second level. This involves reframing one's narrative of one's life – it helps one change the way one thinks about particular situations. In some cases, especially when one is judging oneself against standards set by society or community, sometimes reframing helps one get a new perspective and break out of a mould that has become outmoded (e.g. in earlier generations, many families insisted that their children become doctors or engineers or bureaucrats - other professions were considered to be unworthy. However, people have broken the traditional mould of success and many who took to hotel management, sports, and entertainment and the arts have also stamped their own mark of success in society). If the problems one has landed in due to personality predispositions are very severe, then mere reframing may not be sufficient. In such a case, finding a niche where one's unique personality could be an asset may be a better decision. For instance, high spontaneity may not be welcome in

the insurance industry but it may be desirable in adventure activity such as mountaineering, etc.

In conclusion, it may be mentioned that understanding one's personality can give one important insights about self. Many psychologists suggest that in and of itself, any combination of the Big Five Personality traits cannot be a boon or a bane – what really matters is the fit that it has with one's environment and goals. It is possible for a person to build his/her life on personality strengths while not becoming paranoid about one's weaknesses. (Strengths and weaknesses get determined in terms of one's environment and goals). It is possible to find self-actualisation for everyone.

Interested readers may like to get an understanding of their own personality. For this, a psychometric test has been made available for free at the following address:  
<https://openpsychometrics.org/tests/IPIP-BFFM/>

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