Rethinking personality

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This paper provides an overview and critique of personality psychology. It discusses personality psychology in terms of three major movements: (1) clinical psychology; (2) trait theory; and (3) interpersonal theory. The paper criticizes clinical psychology for focusing on psychopathology, and it criticizes trait theory for being circular. It then provides an alternative, grounded in evolutionary theory and framed in terms of interpersonal processes. Next, it criticizes traditional assessment for trying to measure entities rather than predict outcomes. Finally, the paper reviews standard criticisms of personality assessment (e.g., low validity, faking) and argues that these criticisms lack merit.

Keywords: human nature, interpersonal theory, measurement theory

Personality theory and personality assessment are connected. Personality theory involves making big generalizations about people and personality assessment involves testing those generalizations by predicting how people behave in various circumstances. But academic psychology no longer seems to take personality theory seriously. In the US, for example, there are few graduate programs and almost no jobs for new Ph.D.'s in personality. One could conclude that it is a dead discipline. And few personality test publishers have theories to support their assessments. They sell tests, but they could sell anything. They could sell oatmeal or condoms, they do not care. But personality matters, it concerns the nature of human nature. Humans are the most consequential animals on earth. We are the deadliest and most invasive species in history. So would it not be useful to know something about people? And what does personality psychology tell us about people? It depends on whom you ask.

European depth psychology

As a formal discipline, personality psychology began with continental European psychiatry and with such names as Charcot, Janet, Freud, Jung, Adler, and Erikson. That tradition contains many interesting and important insights, and a qualified appreciation of Freud is an IQ test. Nonetheless, despite those insights, the European tradition oriented the field in the wrong direction for 100 years, something that still impacts us today.

The problem concerns the fact that, according to these European pioneers, the most important generalization we can make about people is that everyone is neurotic and the most important problem in life is to overcome one's neurosis. For the person on the street, personality psychology is

about explaining neuroses and personality assessment is about diagnosing "craziness." But these assumptions are wrong. For example, neurosis is normally distributed; although clinical psychologists tend to be neurotic, the rest of the world is less disturbed. In addition, it is easy to show that Freud, Jung, Erikson, and Adler projected their personal problems on the rest of humanity. Freud had problems with his father, Jung had problems with religion, Erikson could not figure out his identity, Adler had problems with his self-esteem, etc.

So, the generalization that everyone is neurotic is false. But what about the measurement agenda? It turns out that measures of psychopathology do not predict many interesting outcomes. If all we know about someone is that he or she is not crazy, we still do not really know very much. We do not know if that person has a sense of humor, is creative, or has good judgment. The Freudian generalization is wrong and measuring psychopathological tendencies is not very helpful for understanding most problems in careers and life.

Trait theory

If European depth psychology is an unhelpful guide to human nature, what is the alternative? Today the overwhelming favorite is trait theory. Trait theory begins with Gordon Allport's (1938) textbook, which established personality psychology as an academic discipline in the United States. Other pioneers of trait theory include Raymond Cattell and Hans Eysenck, British psychologists whose psychometric research put trait theory on the map. There is a direct line of intellectual descent between Cattell and Eysenck and modern trait theorists such as Costa and McCrae. The original version of Costa and McCrae's well-known personality inventory (the NEO) contained Eysenck's three traits of Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Psychoticism (Openness). When Paul Costa learned about the Five-Factor Model, he added Conscientiousness and Agreeableness.

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What is the most important generalization that trait theory makes about people? It is that people have traits. And what, according to trait theory, is the most important problem in life? It is to discover our traits. This means that the goal of assessment is to reveal our traits, and we discover our traits by buying a trait assessment. This process resembles paying to discover our ancestry and learning that we have Neanderthal genes–which is why we have red hair. Trait assessment and ancestry analysis are equally informative about human nature.

There is also a serious logical problem with trait theory: it defines traits as both consistencies in overt behavior and as unobservable neuro-psychic entities. Behavioral patterns are real and can be observed and quantified. But these proposed neuro-psychic structures are fiction. They are like phlogiston in 19th century chemistry. They are something trait theorists invented to explain behavior, but closer analysis has yet to reveal their existence. Granted, hormones are real, neurotransmitters are real, but traits as underlying neuro-psychic structures do not exist. And you cannot define traits as both behavioral patterns and underlying neural psychic structures. They cannot be both.

Another problem is that trait theory confuses prediction with explanation. It is one thing to identify consistent patterns of behavior which you can call traits, but another to explain these patterns in terms of traits. It is a tautology to explain what we are trying to predict with what we are trying to predict –e.g., Donald Trump is arrogant because he has a trait for arrogance. The intellectual agenda of trait theory is to assess traits, which are then used to explain behavior. This suggests trait theory is conceptually vacuous.

Interpersonal theory

There is a third way to understand human nature: interpersonal theory. Key figures include Adam Smith, whose *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) launched this tradition. This tradition also includes Argyle (1967), Benjamin (1993), Carson (1969), Foa and Foa (1974), Kelly (1954), Kiesler (1983), Leary (1957), McDougall (1908), Mead (1934), Sarbin (1952), Sullivan (1953), and Wiggins (1996).

Interpersonal theory argues that almost everything consequential in life occurs during social interaction, and the contents of individual consciousness is the residue of past interactions. People are most alive when they interact with others. When they are alone, they typically think about either past interactions or get ready for the next one. For interpersonal theory, everything important happens in public. For trait theory, important events mainly happen inside peoples' heads. But it is impossible objectively to know what is inside peoples' heads. It is, however, possible to determine how people treat other people–how people interact with others provides the data for interpersonal theory.

From our perspective, one of the most important aspects of interpersonal theory is its emphasis on measurement. Starting with Leary's (1957) interpersonal circumplex, this tradition focuses on specifying in quantitative terms the key themes underlying social behavior (cf. Wiggins, 1996).

Philosophy of science

Philosophers of science distinguish prediction and explanation. In personality psychology, it is important to distinguish between what people do and why they do it. Trait theory explains behavioral consistencies (which they call traits) in terms of imaginary neuro-psychic entities (which they also call traits). In contrast, interpersonal theory maintains that traits exist in the behavior of actors and minds of observers. We watch other people and encode their behavior in trait terms. Trait terms provide the vocabulary for describing the distinctive features we observe in other people's behavior. We describe and predict others' behavior using trait terms, but we should explain their behavior in terms of their intentions. People do what they do, not because of activities in their brains, but because they have agendas. Agendas explain peoples' behavior. There may well be patterns of neural activity that parallel various agendas, and people can study those patterns of neural activity if they wish, but agendas (intentions, personal projects, goals, etc.) are the units of choice when trying to explain social behavior.

Socioanalytic theory

Ideas have consequences, and what we do follows from the ideas we adopt. Trait theory contributes the idea that traits exist in a finite number. The European pioneers proposed a number of substantive ideas about human nature. Unfortunately, many of their ideas are projections of their own biographies, and if we want to generalize about human nature, it is important to get beyond our own biographies.

In contrast, anthropology, sociology, primate field studies, and evolutionary psychology all concern people in general. When we reflect on people from these latter perspectives, we see four important things about human nature. First, people always live in groups. We evolved as group living animals and solitary primates tend not to live through the night. Second, all social animals form status hierarchies. Not only chicken flocks and shrimp colonies have status hierarchies, status is a cultural universal. Third, there is constant competition within groups for status–who's in, who's out, who's up, who's down, etc. Social interaction (among chimpanzees and humans) mostly concerns negotiating to gain or retain status (De Waal, 1982). And fourth, religion is a cultural universal and an ancient human practice.

These themes suggest the existence of three powerful but unconscious motives that pervade human affairs. At a deep level, people need social acceptance and respect, and they find any sign of rejection stressful (cf. Bowlby, 1969). People also want status and power and control of resources, and they find any possible loss of status stressful (Marmot, 2006). The higher people are in the status hierarchy, the better their lives; the lower they are, the worse their lives. And finally, people have a deep need for meaning, structure, and purpose (Frankl, 1968).

These themes are directly related to fitness, which in biological terms, concerns the progeny people leave behind. Biological fitness does not concern individual happiness; rather it concerns how well peoples' children do. The more acceptance and social support people have within

their groups, the better their chance to survive. And the more status and power people have, the better off their children will be. The more predictability and order they have, the better off their families will be. That is fitness. Seeking acceptance, status, and meaning is biologically mandated; being neurotic is not.

So, the big goals in life concern getting along, getting ahead, and finding meaning. And the goal of assessment is to predict individual differences in the ability to achieve these goals. What other criteria could matter? The degree to which people are self-actualized? The degree to which they understand themselves? How much do differences in self-actualization or self-understanding matter in terms of fitness?

People want to be accepted, to be powerful and famous, and for their lives to matter. But they are different in three consequential ways. First, they differ in terms of how they think about themselves, which is their identity. Identity directs behavior–who they think they are (or want to be) determines what they do and how they do it. Second, people differ in how others think about them, which is reputation, and the real payoff in life. Reputation impacts every consequential aspect of careers. And third, people differ in terms of social skill, or the ability to bring their reputation in line with their identity. There can be a difference between who you think you are and who we think you are. Social skill brings those two perspectives together.

Identity versus reputation

Gordon Allport, the father of personality psychology in America, believed that personality is about identity–discovering the real you, the inner you, the deep down you. Allport considered reputation to be epiphenomenal or trivial. But 100 years of research on identity have produced meager results. There is no measurement base, no taxonomy, and few significant generalizations to report. Identity concerns the "you" that you know, but Freud would say, "The 'you' that you know is hardly worth knowing." The reason is that your identity is the story you tell yourself about yourself to get through the day. He would argue, and we agree, that it is important to know how much you lie to yourself about how much you lie to yourself. And at the level of identity, it is hard to separate truth from fiction because people invent their biographies and life stories. This makes identity hard to study.

Reputation is the "you that we know." It is easy to study reputation by passing out checklists, asking people to describe each other, and then factor analyzing the descriptions. Doing this gives us the structure of reputation. We have a reliable taxonomy of reputation, namely the Five-Factor Model (FFM; Wiggins, 1996). Trait words concern consistent behavioral tendencies which translate into reputation; reputation concerns observable behavior, not unobservable psychic events. Because the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, and because reputation reflects past behavior, reputation is the best data source we have regarding what people will do in the future. It follows that assessment should focus on reputation, not on identity.

There are few useful correlates of individual differences in identity because we cannot assess identity in a re-liable manner. But defining and assessing personality in terms of reputation produces a cornucopia of result (cf. Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). We know about personality and job satisfaction, personality and marital satisfaction, personality and substance abuse, personality and driving behavior, personality and educational performance, personality and employability, etc. By defining personality in terms of reputation, we have been able to accumulate a large body of useful results.

Life is to a large extent about social interaction; people gain or lose status and social acceptance (and create their reputations) based on their performance during social interaction. What is needed to have an interaction? We need an agenda and roles to play, as in "let's get together and have a little talk." Social skill mostly concerns being able to set agendas and negotiate roles.

Peoples' identities determine the roles they are willing to play and how they play them. Think about students in a class: they are all in the role of student, but they all play that role differently. Those differences reflect their identities and create their reputations. So, the units of analysis for personality are identity, reputation, and social skill (not traits). Our identity is the person we think we are, our reputation is the person others know we are, and social skill bridges the gap between the two. Smart players in the game of life know how to manage their reputations. When we give people feedback based on personality assessments, we tell them how to manage their reputations. We try to provide them with "strategic self-awareness." Freud and Allport thought self-awareness concerns identity–acquiring deep self-knowledge. We argue that self-awareness is really other awareness–understanding how other people perceive us. And we use assessments to create this kind of strategic self-awareness.

In the tradition of European depth psychology, self-knowledge concerns understanding the deep secrets about ourselves. Although Socrates and the ancient Greeks extolled the virtue of self-knowledge, they defined it quite differently from Freud and Allport. By self-knowledge they meant understanding the limits of our performance capabilities—knowing what we are good at and what we are not good at. And that definition is consistent with our perspective. We believe self-knowledge concerns knowing how others perceive us during social interaction–knowing our interpersonal strengths and shortcomings.

Now think about introspection. If introspection is useful, then people who introspect should have better careers and an advantage in the game of life. But it turns out that they do not do better, and that they may even be at a disadvantage. The disposition to introspect is normally distributed. People who are neurotic engage in constant introspection. But significant worldly players such as Voltaire, U. S. Grant, Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, Ronald Reagan, and Margaret Thatcher were famously incapable of introspection–they could not and would not do it. In an article in *The New Yorker* magazine, Tony Schwartz, the man who wrote "The Art of the Deal" with Donald Trump, reports that he gave up trying to persuade Trump to talk about himself (Mayer, 2016). If Schwartz asked Trump any question requiring self-reflection, Trump would leave the room. Clearly there is no competitive or

career advantage to introspection. Self-knowledge based on introspection is useless. All of the valid news about ourselves comes from feedback from others.

Metaphysics of assessment

We turn now to the metaphysics of psychological assessment. Alfred Binet created the first well-respected psychometric instrument. He designed it to predict individual differences in academic performance. The French government had mandated universal public education and wanted a systematic way to identify those who were most likely to profit from state funded education. So, Binet wanted to use his test to predict academic performance.

Lewis Terman at Stanford University translated Binet's test into English. Terman called the English translation a measure of intelligence. So, Binet wanted to predict educational outcomes and Terman wanted to measure cognitive entities. Similarly, in the realm of personality assessment, the California Psychological Inventory (CPI; Gough, 1975) and the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI: Hogan & Hogan, 2007) were developed to predict career performance, whereas the 16PF (Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970) and the NEO-PI (Costa & McCrae, 1985) were developed to measure traits. Predicting outcomes and measuring traits are very different activities.

Something changed as we moved from Binet to today. Binet, the true progenitor of psychological assessment, believed that assessment has a job to do–predict how people will perform in various career environments–as a police officer, an astronaut, during the winter at the South Pole, at the bottom of a mine. The goal of assessment is to predict non-test performance, not measure entities. Intelligence is a poorly defined conceptual entity, even after all these years. Similarly, traits are fictional brain entities. How can we determine if we have measured an entity when we do not know how properly to define the entity in the first place? Psychometricians talk about measuring "true scores." A true score is a Platonic ideal, a concept that exists in a non-spatial/non-temporal universe, in a world of pure forms somewhere out in the clouds. In our view, there are no true scores, the only scores that exist are those that real people obtain.

It is worth noting that there is a deep similarity between the standard concepts of a trait and of a true score. Both concepts refer to entities that are idealized abstractions–entities that, in principle, must be inferred rather than observed directly. Traits (Allport's in-dwelling neuro-psychic entities) and true scores are comparable metaphysical fictions.

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) contains an extended critique of Plato addressing this exact point. What does something mean? Summarizing Wittgenstein, he says the meaning of something is not defined by its resemblance to an ideal but by how you use it. It follows from his argument that the meaning of a test score is defined by what it predicts. If a score does not predict anything, then it does not mean anything. So the goal of assessment should be to predict outcomes, not to measure entities.

Self-report

What are people doing when they endorse items on questionnaires? The answer requires a review of theories of item responses. Trait theory says people provide "self-reports," which is a theory of item responses, but a wrong one. What would providing a self-report really mean? Self-report theory assumes that people read items (e.g., "I read ten books a year") and then play back memory tapes in their heads, scanning them for evidence regarding how to respond to the item. But modern cognitive psychology tells us that we construct our memories based on a variety of idiosyncratic reasons. Our memories are stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. There are no theoretical video tapes that contain our memories.

Self-report theory is factually incorrect. When people respond to questionnaire items, they provide identity claims–statements about how they would like to be regarded. They are trying to control how others will react to them. They are engaged in a form of reputation management. John Johnson did a series of technically brilliant empirical studies comparing self-report theory with self-presentation theory (Johnson, 1981). His work shows that the self-presentational theory of item responses fits the data much better than the self-report theory. Personality items do not measure self-reports, they sample self-presentations.

This means that trait theory is wrong at every level. The definition of traits (as both behavioral consistencies and neuro-psychic structures) is circular. Trait theorists misunderstand the goal of assessment, which they take as measuring entities, as opposed to predicting outcomes. And they are wrong about what people do when responding to questionnaire items. They are also wrong about the theoretical functions of traits: traits exist in the observed behavior of actors and in the minds of observers–observers ascribe traits to actors to make sense out of the actors' behavior. But individual actors do not have traits, they have agendas.

Validity and faking

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a wall of resistance against personality assessment in academic psychology. The first 13 papers R. Hogan submitted for publication came back without being reviewed. Editors said things like "Everyone knows personality assessment doesn't work, so we're not going to review this paper." And although personality assessment is now back in favor, the critics still argue that the validity of personality assessment is trivial, and the process is corrupted by faking. Let us examine these two claims more closely.

First, how well does personality assessment work? You have to ask "how well does it work compared to what?" For the purpose of comparison, Table 1 presents some validity coefficients for standardized medical interventions (Meyer et al., 2001).

Table 1. Validity coefficients for standardized medical interventions

Procedure	Correlation (Pearson's r)	Sample Size
Coronary bypass surgery and survival rate	.08	2,649
Smoking and lung cancer within 25 years	.08	3,956
Antihistamines and reduced phlegm	.11	1,023
Effect of ibuprofen on pain reduction	.14	8,488
Effect of Viagra on headaches and flushing	.25	861
Viagra and improved sexual functioning	.38	779
Height and weight of U.S. adults	.44	16,948

Table 2. Relationships between HPI scores and aligned criteria

Scale	N	r	ρ
Adjustment	2,573	.25	.43
Ambition	3,698	.20	.35
Likeability	2,500	.18	.34
Prudence	3,379	.22	.36
Intellect/Openness	1,190	.20	.34

Hogan and Holland (2003) published the best meta-analysis yet on the validity of personality for predicting performance. Prior meta-analyses of personality and outcomes combined the results of various inventories. But doing this research correctly requires using the same instrument across studies because, for example, the HPI and the NEO are very different. Then, it is necessary to align predictors and criteria; that is, do not try to predict talking in public with a measure of neuroticism or rule-following with a measure of extraversion. When predictors are aligned with criteria, and the same inventory is used across studies, the results turn out well (see Table 2).

As this table indicates, personality is stronger than Viagra and the correlations are substantial. But notice also that Extraversion/Sociability is missing from the table. That is because Extraversion predicts talking a lot and little else. People with high scores on Sociability love interaction and they confuse talking with getting something done. Academic psychologists seem not to understand that Extraversion is mostly noise.

The second major critique of personality assessment is that the process is degraded because job applicants fake. Hogan, Barrett, and Hogan (2007) collected HPI data from over 5,000 people who had applied for a security job and were denied employment during the application process. These people were retested after six months. It is reasonable to assume that they would be motivated to fake on the second occasion. But only about 5% changed their scores beyond the standard error of measurement from time 1 to time 2, and about half of those improved their scores while the other half received lower scores. As interpersonal theory predicts, a measure of social skill predicted which way their scores moved. This study, using real job applicants in a repeated measures design, shows that faking is not an issue in employment selection.

How do the critics of personality assessment define faking? They define it as not being oneself. But who can we be other than ourselves? Perhaps the critics mean faking involves responding in a way that is inconsistent with our true selves. But we would argue that your true self is something of which you should be terribly ashamed. For example, childhood socialization largely involves teaching children to fake–to pretend that they do not have the impulses they childishly want to express. We tell them "you ought not to behave like that." But if children do not act on their impulses, they are not being themselves. They are faking.

And the only objective way to define faking is in terms of scores on measures of faking. Paulhus (1984) identifies two kinds of faking. The first involves *unconsciously* claiming attributes that you actually do not have. For example, virtually everyone will positively endorse the item "I have a good sense of humor," while it is not true. Everyone endorses the item, and they believe it, but are they faking? The second kind of faking involves people *consciously* claiming attributes that they do not have–for example "I have never passed gas." What does it mean to endorse these items? The meaning of scales composed of such items is defined by what they predict. And what do they predict? People who say "I have a great sense of humor" get high scores for Adjustment and Conscientiousness. They are even-tempered, well-socialized people who relate fluidly with others and, like all good politicians, shade the truth a bit. And what about people who have high scores on the "I have never passed gas" scale? They get high scores for Agreeableness–they want you to think well of them and will tell little lies to try to make it happen.

Last thoughts

Personality is not an exact science. Neither is investing in stocks or drilling for oil, but both have big payoffs. Personality assessment provides important information about peoples' performance potential. This information is essential for helping people to improve their performance. Well-constructed measures of personality predict performance about as well as IQ, and in some cases better. They provide crucial feedback for career development.

Trait theory has taken personality psychology down an unproductive road. Traits exist, but they exist in the perceived behavior of actors. We attribute traits to other people because that is how we make sense of their behavior. We say, he's aggressive, she's funny, she's not to be trust-

ed, he's neurotic, and so on. We have to assign people to those categories to navigate the social universe. Traits exist in the behaviors of actors and in the minds of the observers. But peoples' behavior is not guided (nor explained) by traits; it is guided (and explained) by their agendas. People have goals, purposes, and intentions. Traits describe behavior; intentions explain behavior. Traits help us make sense of what other people do, so traits are good for us. But they are little prisons for other people; we pack other people into the little trait boxes and thereby dehumanize them.

The problem of explanation in physical science is inherently different from the problem of explanation in biology, and especially in the behavioral sciences. Imagine a behavioral pattern we want to explain. We can imitate the physical sciences and try to reduce the behavior to neural hormonal secretions, but we will rarely ever succeed. Many psychologists favor reductionist explanations, but they are a model for chemistry and physics. In the behavioral sciences, we have to explain behavior in terms of what people are trying to accomplish.

Consider a computer analogy: how do you explain the behavior of a computer – how does it move to a solution? On the one hand, a computer will solve a problem because it has a power supply; because it is turned on, it will move to a solution. On the other hand, we explain its operation in terms of the way it is programmed and the data it uses to derive a solution. The power supply (which is about chemistry) partially explains the behavior. But the programming also explains the behavior. Do we explain what a computer is doing because it is turned on? No. We explain what a computer is doing in terms of its programming and the data on which it is operating. Although people are turned on, they are also going somewhere.

Personality primarily concerns individual differences in the ability to get along and to get ahead. It only derivatively concerns individual differences in mental health. And what is wrong with being neurotic by the way? According to clinical psychology, the problem with being neurotic is that neurotics cannot self-actualize, reach their goals, or realize their innate natural potential. But the real problem with being neurotic is really that neurotics drive others crazy and prevent them from reaching their goals. Neurotics are likely to suffer, which is a shame, but they ought not to take it out on other people.

Personality assessment involves predicting outcomes, not measuring entities. It follows that personality concerns individual differences in career success. And data show that the longer a person's tenure in a position, the better personality will predict performance. This is because responses to questionnaire items are self-presentations, not self-reports. Faking is a bogus issue.

And finally, much of what we learned in graduate school is wrong. John Holland, one of the greatest psychologists of the 20th century, used to say "forget everything you learned in graduate school." If we went back to graduate school now, the lessons would be radically different. What we learned in graduate school reflected a particular time and place. And if we went to graduate school now, we would hear a whole different story. So we should forget everything we learned in graduate school–especially the part about trait theory.

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