Peeling Back the Layers of Personality: Adding Insight to Behavior

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When people use the term personality, what exactly are they talking about? When someone is described as having a good personality, or as being a good fit for an organization, what does this mean?

What is personality?

The word personality was first used in the late 14th century to refer to the “...quality or fact of being a person.”[^1] Over the centuries the term personality has become so common, and used in so many different ways, that it has no clear definition.

In the most general way, personality refers to the unique configuration of qualities that characterize how an individual functions in their life circumstances.

While each person is unique, he or she does share qualities with others. For example, two individuals will always be different from each other, but they also can be similar in a number of ways. It has been said that “every person is like all other persons, like some other persons, and like no other person.”[^2] This quote suggests that to understand an individual’s personality, it is important to identify the ways in which that person is like others, and the ways in which they are different.

A Bigger Picture Perspective on Personality Development

It is helpful to think of an individual’s personality developing in layers. Individuals are born with certain characteristics that influence initial interactions with the world. As personality develops through experiences in different situations with different people, aspects of the personality “signature” emerge. In other words, even people with similar inborn characteristics develop unique ways of behaving in different circumstances, based on their unique experiences. As more and more experiences occur, the successive layers of an individual’s personality become more unique. Thus, some basic comparisons of individuals can be made at the inner layers, but more complexities emerge at the outer layers where greater comparisons can be made.

While personality dynamics are complex, there are important features at each layer that can be reliably measured and used to predict characteristic ways that an individual will engage their world. Each layer offers some opportunity to understand unique aspects of personality.
LAYER 1 – Basic Personal Temperament

Personality begins developing before an individual is even born, and at birth, the frequency and complexity of our interactions with the world around us increase dramatically. Even at birth, our evolved human nature has equipped us with some basic tendencies necessary for these interactions and the satisfaction of our basic needs and drives (e.g., orienting to a caregiver’s face, crying for food).

Some agreement is emerging about how to view basic personal temperament. For example, research suggests everyone is born with two fundamental motivational systems that are neurologically based. The approach system drives us toward rewards in the environment, while the avoidance system motivates us away from threats in the environment. People differ with regard to how actively or intensely they operate, as well as the strength of each relative to the other, but ALL people have these basic motivational systems. They begin at birth to affect an individual’s reactions to life circumstances and events.

Variations in these basic tendencies create the early-life conditions for the differences in the development of the next layer of personality – core personal traits.

LAYER 2 – Core Personal Traits

A relatively small number of core personal traits are the most stable and recognizable aspect of adult personality. The core trait profile represents the general sketch of an individual’s personality. Core traits are broad, comparative dimensions of functioning in one’s daily life. An individual’s core trait profile summarizes the overall style with which that individual adjusts to, copes with, and engages the world around them. While people’s daily emotions, thoughts, and behavior can vary considerably depending on particular circumstances, one’s core trait profile sketches the most common way of engaging the world, over time and across different situations.

While many theories of psychological traits have been advanced over the years, the most commonly researched and used theory in human resource applications is the Big Five (or Five Factor Model). Variations exist, but it is the dominant way of organizing traits. However, there is much more to personality than the Big Five!

EXAMPLE
Basic Personal Temperament

Some babies sleep through the night, so when they awaken, they have parents who are rested and resilient. Early parental responses start the process of developing the infant’s personality. In this case, a more patient and relaxed parental response to a morning cry may serve to soothe the infant, and it may begin learning that its behavior does not provoke anxiety or frustration in others.

EXAMPLE
Core Personal Traits

One of the most researched personality traits is Extroversion-Introversion. This trait describes how frequently and intently people seek opportunities to interact with others. Extroverts are energized by positive emotion when being around other people. Introverts tend to prefer solitude or small groups of close friends. These differences begin to develop early in life, grow out of differences in basic temperaments, and are relatively stable once a person reaches early adulthood.
What are the Big Five personality characteristics?

The Big Five taxonomy of personality references a common model of higher-level qualities and characteristics, creating a familiar ground for researching and understanding an individual’s personality and how he or she relates to others.

The Big Five includes Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism (Emotional Stability). This taxonomy has surfaced from decades of research on personality, a survey of the natural language, and extensive statistical analyses, and has been replicated and validated across numerous assessments, languages, and cultures. For more detailed information consult work by L.R. Goldberg, R.R. McCrae, P.T. Costa, Jr., and O.P. John.

While the Big Five is helpful for descriptions at a general level, it’s important to understand how personality develops through the next level – personal adaptations.

Layer 3 – Personal Adaptations

This is a richly developed, and more individualized layer of personality than the first two layers. Personalities vary widely with regard to ways of processing information about interactions with others, personal reactions to recurring events, and strategies for coping with problems or challenges when trying to achieve important goals.

The science of psychology has many theories about the numerous personal adaptive strategies that people develop over their lifetimes. These personal adaptations include motives, values, virtues, preferences, interests, goals, plans, coping strategies, beliefs, biases, prejudices, expectations, enduring attitudes, knowledge and skills, competencies, defense mechanisms, among many others.

Personal adaptations differ from core personal traits in that they are tied to more specific situations, and therefore, may change over time. They develop in particular contexts, and are shaped and triggered by the everyday demands of social life. Of course, core personal traits are related to personal adaptations – an individual’s profile of personal adaptations is partially determined by the underlying profile of core personal traits, and basic personal temperament.

Example

Personal Adaptations

People develop different coping mechanisms for managing stress. Some people cope by avoiding situations, others alter the way they think about things, some endure the stress and then try to reduce it through meditating or exercising, and still others may use alcohol or other substances. Other personal adaptations include vocational preferences or interests - some people prefer to work with their hands, while others prefer to work with numbers, or creative visual graphics, etc.
The fact that personal adaptations are evoked in particular situations, and may change over time does not mean that they are less important than core traits for understanding personality. In fact, they represent a readily observable and richly individual level of functioning that is the heart of human personality. To summarize, core personal traits answer the question, “What kind of person is this?” Personal adaptations provide the answer to “Who is this person?”

**LAYER 4 – Personal Narrative Identity**

This layer of personality is what makes each person truly unique from every other person. This is the intricately rich, and ongoing, personal narrative or life story that shapes behavior, underlies one’s identity, and integrates individuals into modern social life.

In other words, people CONSTRUCT their lives by having experiences, and making sense out of how they all fit together. This internalized and evolving self-narrative integrates the past, present, and imagined future into a coherent whole that provides meaning, and unified purpose. To summarize, if core personal traits are the personality sketch, and personality adaptations fill in the details, then personal identity lends individuals’ their unique meaning. To summarize, core personal traits answer the question, “What kind of person is this?” Personal adaptations provide the answer to “Who is this person?” Personal narrative identities answer the question, “Who am I, and how is my life uniquely meaningful?”

**EXAMPLE**

**Personal Narrative Identity**

Every person’s life story is different. The rich and detailed autobiographical account that someone gives of their life, is a mosaic of meaningful memories, reconstructions of past events, and characteristic interpretations that all combine into a personal identity. For example, many people identify with having faced adversities in life and triumphed in overcoming the suffering to become more capable. This theme is associated with identifiable effects on growth, development, and general well-being. Knowing the details and themes in a person’s personal narrative identity can provide a richly textured account of how they have and will function in various future life circumstances.

**Practical Implications**

Many organizations include personality assessments as an integral part of their selection systems. By identifying which layer of personality is being targeted by the assessment, more focused comparisons among individuals can be made. Additionally, for positions of greater organizational importance, assessing the outer-most layers of personality could add great insight into how the individuals occupying those positions are likely to behave.
Summary and Conclusions

Personality develops in layers. Inborn characteristics influence initial interactions with the world. As people develop through experiences in different situations with people, aspects of the personality signature emerge. People develop ways of behaving, based on their unique experiences. As more experiences occur, the successive layers of personality become more unique. Thus, a few basic comparisons of individuals can be made at the inner layers, and more complex comparisons emerge at the outer layers.

**LAYER 1.** Evident at birth, one’s basic temperament determines early interactions with one’s environment (e.g., calm v. easily agitated, active and happy v. lethargic and fearful), and thus begins the formative process for developing one’s personality.

**LAYER 2.** Emerges and evolves early in life via various experiences. Profile is stably developed by early adulthood. The Big Five is an example of taxonomy used to describe the general sketch of one’s overall style of engaging their world.

**LAYER 3.** A wide range of adaptations developed in specific contexts and circumstances throughout one’s life. The profile of adaptations “fill in the details” of the general sketch from Layer 2.

**LAYER 4.** An internalized evolving “narrative of the self” that integrates the individual with the broader society and provides some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning.

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