

Who Are You, Really? The Surprising Puzzle of Personality

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Contents

1 Scanning Your Personality: The Big Picture	3
1.1 Personal Zoom: Scanning the Inner You	3
1.2 The Big 5: The Original You	4
1.3 Open to Experience	4
1.4 Conscientiousness	4
1.5 Extraversion	5
1.6 Agreeableness	5
1.7 Neuroticism	5
1.8 The Outer Sociogenic You	5
2 Personal Projects: The Doings of Personality	5
3 Personal Contexts: The Social Ecology of Project Pursuit	5
4 The Myth of Authenticity: The Challenge of Being Oneself	5
5 Well-Doing: The Sustainable Pursuit of Core Projects	5
References	5

Introduction

“Who are you? It’s a nosy question, I know, & perhaps even an uncomfortable one. If I asked you that question over a beer at a bar, you’d probably bolt for the door. But once you realized I was merely an inquisitive psychologist, I suspect you’d have a list of personality traits at the ready. “I’m an extravert,” you might say proudly. Or “I’m a nurturer,” or “I’m a worrier,” or “I am the 5th least narcissistic person on earth.” Each of us has a sense of the basic traits that define us.

Next, if I asked you *why* you are that way, you’d probably also have some answers already in your quiver. “Because I’m from the west coast,” you might say. Or “Because I’m an oldest child,” or “Because my dad was a drinker,” or “Because the Great Recession hit while I was in high school.” You’d have good reason to make those connections. It’s clear that outside influences – your home life, the community where you grew up, the political milieu into which you were born – have shaped your life & the way you behave.

& that’s it, you might think, it’s settled. You are who you are because of your inherent nature coupled with the external forces that have influenced you throughout your life. It isn’t really that complex, is it? You’ve spent enough years getting to know yourself that you should have the picture of your personality put together by now. Right?

You’d better settle in, because your exploration of you is just getting started.

You see, genetics & experiences aren’t everything. There is a 3rd force that also determines your personality. & when it comes to this force, our usual assumptions have it backward; it’s not *who you are* that explains *what you do*, it’s the other way around. That, in fact, is the very idea I’m about to present to you. It is an important new way of looking at personality, & it is what I’ve spent the better part of a half-century researching & understanding.

Your life & your identity derive from more than just your inborn traits & your circumstances; they are borne of your aspirations & commitments, your dreams & your everyday doings. These defining activities are, in 2 words, your *personal projects*. Personal projects can range from the seemingly trivial pursuits of particular Thursdays to the overarching quest of your life. They include endeavors small & large, from the intimate to the professional, from the mundane to the existential. They range from “taking out the garbage” to “taking out my political opponent.” These personal projects, for better or

worse, are shaped in part by both our biological traits & our social contexts. But they transcend each. Because unlike nature & nurture, they are 1 feature of human life that is not given to us by heredity or society but is generated from within.

You might already be wondering how much your activities could really affect something that seems as stable as your personality & sense of self. The answer is perhaps more than you might imagine. Personal projects are central not only to who you think you are but also to how well you are doing in life – whether you are flourishing or floundering, or like most of us, just muddling through as best you can. Your personal projects, in short, are key to your prospects. Learn to understand them & their impact, & you learn to guide your life in the direction you want it to go.

In these pages we'll look closely at your personality in terms of how your life has gone & how it is going now. But we'll also be concerned with how it might yet go in the future. This is where your personal projects come in: Once you can clearly identify your personal projects & their power, you'll also see the degrees of freedom or spaces for movement that are open to you in determining your own course. My own personal project with this book is to help you see & steer your life – & to do this before kids with scrapes, cats with furballs, or friends who really need to talk right now divert you from plotting your future self.

As I want to make this personal for both of us, let's start with my own account of how I came to study human personality. It was an unusually hot September afternoon in 1965 when I cautiously tapped on the office door of Prof. Theodore R. Sarbin. Sarbin was an eminent scholar of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. I was a 2nd-year graduate student eager to join his research group. The door swung open & a voice intoned loudly, "WHO ARE YOU?" I inferred from Sarbin's stentorian voice & the way he drew out the "o" in "who" that this was more than a desire to know my name. He wanted me to declare my identity! Or what role I was playing, what self I was enacting at that very moment. So I said, in a self-mocking, elevated tone: "A seeker after truth." Sarbin rolled his eyes, snickered, & said, "Oh no, not another one."

A more honest answer to Sarbin's question would have been less grandiose but more complex & interesting. I could have described the personality traits that I'd known were mine since childhood: introverted, curious, & affable. I could have described my roles in relation to other people & the world: a psychology student, a passionate dabbler in piano, & a Kennedy supporter still aching from the assassination. But that was a lot to spurt out in a professor's doorway. Besides, even that would not have contained an entirely accurate picture. Because at the precise moment in my life, I was undergoing a radical change spurred by the extraordinary political events unfolding around me, which I will get to shortly.

But 1st some context: Psychology at the time was still grappling with whether biological or social forces were more powerful, more consequential, in shaping our personalities – what, back then, we called the nature-nurture debate.

"I am, in essence, my brain, Prof. Sarbin," I could have said, aligning myself with the believers in nature, or biological determinism. Indeed, the opportunity to explore the biological basis of behavior was the reason I had chosen to go to Berkeley in the 1st place. Prior to grad school I had been a research assistant in a neuropsychology laboratory, & when I applied to grad school, I was convinced that what shapes our personalities is primarily genetic & neuropsychological – what I call biogenic influences. I believed that the study of the brain would be the best route to understanding who we *really* are.

Or I could have sworn my allegiance to the nurture camp. I was a short, skinny kid from the west coast of Canada, the son of a whimsical Irish father & a nurturing English mother, & raised in a whimsically nurturing environment. These sociogenic influences aligned with Sarbin's view of what shapes our behavior: He saw individuals as the products of social & cultural forces that provide codes, roles, & scripts for how to live.

All the time, there was also a new twist developing around the nature-nurture debate. An interdisciplinary team of psychologists & anatomists at Berkeley had demonstrated that by enriching the external living environments of rodents, they could directly change the animals' brain structure & biochemistry.¹ Animals reared with social stimulation & complex, exploratory objects in their cages ("friends & toys," as the researchers put it) literally had heavier brains & more complex neural circuitry. This was groundbreaking & controversial stuff, carrying potential implications for improving the quality of life for mice & men (& wolves & women). Yes, biological influences were necessary for a full understanding of behavior, but they were not fixed & immutable; change was possible.

By now, of course, psychology has moved way beyond the old nature-nurture debate of my student days. We now know that these influences are interpenetrating. It is possible to nurture our natures – that was, after all, the lesson we were taught by those little rodents with friends & toys in Berkeley.²

But as I would come to understand, these answers to "Who are you?" simply don't provide the best insights for understanding our true natures. What I have been exploring since that fateful knock on Sarbin's door is how our singular, idiosyncratic pursuits – our personal objects – not only rival the biological & social explanations for who we are, but transform the way we think about each of them. These projects are even powerful enough drivers to make us act out of character, redefining our very personalities. I've experienced this myself.

As I hinted earlier, I was in the midst of a fundamental personal transformation when I entered Sarbin's office. I had arrived in Berkeley a year earlier in Sep 1964, the very week that the Free Speech Movement (FSM) began on campus. The

¹This was a collaborative project between Mark Rosenzweig & David Krech of the Department of Psychology & Marian Diamond of the Department of Anatomy at the University of California, Berkeley. See Rosenzweig, Krech, Bennett, & Diamond (1962).

²The emerging field of social genomics has exciting implications for understanding health & flourishing. E.g., Steve Cole & his colleagues at UCLA have demonstrated that how genes express themselves is linked to how much loneliness is experienced by participants in his studies. See Cole (2009).

university administration had just banned tables from the area students were using to recruit volunteers for freedom rides in the American South. The policy sparked student demonstrations, sit-ins, & teach-ins. Protestors claimed that the massive, distinguished university – a self-proclaimed multiversity – was in thrall to its Nobel laureates & industrial contracts & had little concern for its students.

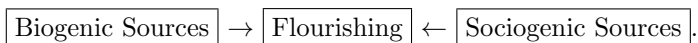
The FSM captured my imagination, & its impact was palpable. It was a call to action – to get involved in projects that became deeply personal, even self-defining. Suddenly the introspective psychology student in me, one who would rather sing about revolution than start it, felt driven to speak out to overcome injustice. This was new, & it shook my sense of identity to its roots. What’s more, that shift propelled me not only to think & feel new things but to act in new ways. This pursuit that I had chosen was, almost invisibly, reshaping the person I was. Projects like “sitting in” or “going to the demonstration” or “seeking justice” were now commitments – acts of meaning with consequences for the person I was becoming.

Which takes us back to the question I originally asked you – the same one that Sarbin startled me with that sweltering day when I knocked on his door: “Who are you?” Understanding yourself as simply the product of biogenic forces prodding you or sociogenic forces shaping you is unduly limiting. I want to convince you that you are also shaped by the personal projects that draw from both your biology & your culture & can, as we will see, transform both. Such projects may cause you to stretch yourself in new directions, to create a sense of meaning in your life. This new way of thinking about yourself will allow us to ask: Who are you, *really*? & equipped with that self-knowledge, you can then understand how you’re doing – & begin actively navigating your future.” – Little, 2017, pp. 6–11

1 Scanning Your Personality: The Big Picture

“So, how you are doing? Are you happy? Are you accomplishing the things that matter to you? Are you living up to your capabilities? Are you able to love & be loved? Are you physically well? Is there some laughter in your life? If you answer yes to all such questions, we might say that you are *flourishing*. If you answer with an emphatic “No!” or even an eyeball-rolling “Seriously, get real,” you might be better described as *floundering*. & in between these extremes, we might find you in the middle, doing reasonably well considering the circumstances.

Biogenic traits deeply influence whether you flourish or flounder. You may be temperamentally predisposed to viewing your life positively & optimistically, even though the objective reality that you confront might be rather bleak. Or despite living in a relatively safe, nurturing, & prosperous environment, you may see your life as half empty, or utterly miserable. The forces of nature & nurture that provide answers to “who are you?” are also key to answering the question “How are you doing?” The relation between these biogenic & sociogenic influences can be simply graphed as:



Whether you are flourishing or floundering, in other words, is partly determined by the combination of biogenic & sociogenic sources that impinge on you during the course of your life. These aren’t the only influences, but we need to understand how they work before we explore how your personal projects empower you to deliberately design who & how you are. So let us begin with a brief tour through the inner biogenic & the outer sociogenic forces that shape your personality.” – Little, 2017, p. 12

1.1 Personal Zoom: Scanning the Inner You

“Imagine a microscope that dips under your skin & zooms down to reveal your tissues, organelles, cell nuclei, chromosomes, & genes. It darts up to your brain & homes in on a single neuron firing a squirt of neurotransmitters & the explosion of activity in associated cells. It then zooms out to focus on the physical body reading this book wondering about who it is & how it’s doing. This “it” is the biogenic you.

Within personality psychology, those who study the biogenic perspective explore how your relatively stable personality traits influence your quality of life. These stable traits correspond to differences in brain structure & function – those microscopic events we just saw when zooming in on the inner you. These biogenic features can be assessed by measures of electrical activity in various regions of your brain or through analysis, which can now be done for roughly \$200. In *My Beautiful Genome*, the Danish science writer Lone Frank relates the fascinating account of her quest to examine aspects of her personal genome & its links to her health & personality. She discovered that she had a gene variant that predisposed her to negative emotionality & what she most agreeably describes as her “own miserably low score in agreeableness.”³

Some of these biogenic personality traits will incline you toward being happy or healthy or accomplished or, conversely, will explain why you despair over life’s various hiccups. Let’s say your life is flourishing right now – you are happy, healthy, & successful, certainly compared to your mopey best friend, but maybe even in an absolute sense. This may be due to your having biogenic features of temperament & personality that dispose you to adopt a positive outlook. Even when life sucks, your stable dispositions make you resilient & buoyant. You continue to grow & prosper. Indeed, you may have *pronoia*, the

³See Lone Frank (2011).

delusional belief that other people are plotting your well-being or saying good things about you behind your back.⁴ Your friend's stable traits, in comparison, may not be conducive to flourishing at all. She is angry & defiant & unsatisfied, & according to her mother, she was like this from birth. She is temperamentally disposed to being ill-disposed. She flounders.” – Little, 2017, pp. 12–14

1.2 The Big 5: The Original You

“Did you know that it is virtually impossible for you to lick the outside of your own elbow? & did you know, strange as it may sound, that how you responded to that piece of information – whether & how you attempted the pursuit – might provide a hint about the stable traits you are born with & that form the bedrock of your personality? Let me explain: While there are thousands of ways we might distinguish people on the basis of their traits, personality psychologists have reached a consensus that people vary from one another along 5 basic dimensions: the Big 5 traits. The Big Five have major consequences for how our lives play out.⁵ If you would like to get a quick assessment of where you stand on these major traits, the Appendix provides some questions that can guide your own self-assessment.

The 5 dimensions spell out an acronym – OCEAN (or CANOE if you prefer): Open to Experience (vs. Closed), Conscientious (vs. Casual), Extraverted (vs. Introverted), Agreeable (vs. Disagreeable), Neurotic (vs. Stable). Each of these traits has a strong biogenic base, & researchers in personality neuroscience are now identifying the neural structures & pathways underlying them.⁶ Because the same dimensions emerge in virtually all countries, cultures, & linguistic groups, these can be regarded as universal dimensions of personality. This doesn't mean that all humans are the same – far from it. Rather, it means that everywhere we go, individuals differ from one another along these dimensions. Also, these 5 traits do not have rigid boundaries; individuals are aligned with each trait on a spectrum, with most of them piled up in the middle of the range & fewer appearing at the extremes. Here is a short overview of each one.” – Little, 2017, pp. 14–16

1.3 Open to Experience

“Those who are high in openness to experience are easily attracted to new ventures & show alacrity in exploring alternative ways of doing things. Those low in openness prefer the tried & true & would, unlike their more open friends, be very comfortable using a phrase like “tried & true.” A landmark study at the Institute of Personality Assessment & Research at Berkeley (now the Institute of Personality & Social Research) revealed that openness to experience was the defining feature of individuals who are exceptionally creative.⁷ In an intriguing study by 1 of the prime developers of the Big 5, open individuals were found to experience aesthetic chills or piloerections – their hair stood up – when exposed to music or art that moved them.⁸

So did you try to lick your elbow? I suspect that if you are game for new experiences, you would have had a go at it. If you are low on openness, you were more likely to just keep reading.” – Little, 2017, pp. 16–17

1.4 Conscientiousness

“Individuals who score high on conscientiousness are particularly likely to satisfy traditional definitions of success. They perform better in academic pursuits & in measures of occupational achievement than those who are low in conscientiousness. It should be noted, though, that these successes are most frequently found in courses & careers that stress conventional problem solving, while those who are high in openness excel at tasks that involve coming up with original ways of doing things. Highly conscientious people are punctual & persevering; they can focus intently on the activities in front of them. This laser focus, however, might work better in some fields than others. E.g., Robert & Janice Hogan, pioneers in the study of personality & organizations, devised a study in which jazz musicians rated their fellow musicians on how good they were as performers. Those who score high in conscientiousness were rated by their peers as *less* effective. Perhaps this is because musicians who intensely concentrate on their playing may be inhibiting the spontaneity crucial to improvisational jazz.⁹

Conscientious adults are likely to avoid drugs, stay clear of dangerous activities, & stick to health & fitness regimens. As such, they are healthier & live longer compared with their less conscientious peers. & the difference in well-being isn't minor: Lack of conscientiousness has been shown to be as important as having heart disease in predicting early death. Conscientious individuals also invest more in work & family roles that reward & increase conscientiousness.

⁴The term *pronoia* was 1st coined by the sociologist Fred Goldner & is meant to depict the characteristics that are the polar opposite to those of paranoia. See Goldner (1982).

⁵There is now a substantial body of research on the Big Five traits. See especially the review by Ozer & Benet-Martínez (2006) that explores the practical consequences of traits for education, marriage, health, & work. Daniel Nettle (2007) has written an excellent introduction for the general reader. See also Little (2014), especially Chap. 2.

⁶An especially promising analysis of the neuropsychological basis of the Big Five traits appears in the work of Colin DeYoung & his colleagues. See DeYoung (2010).

⁷See, e.g., MacKinnon (1962) & Chap. 8 in Little (2014). For a detailed exposition of how the assessment process was carried out, see Serraino (2016).

⁸See McCrae (2007).

⁹See Hogan & Hogan (1993).

How about their elbows & the implicit invitation to lick them? When I've asked people to do this in groups, the conscientious ones are less likely to lick. Instead, I think they write a note to themselves to check it out when they get home. Those who are exceptionally conscientious, I suspect, will have already googled "licking own elbow" to see if it really is impossible to accomplish." – Little, 2017, pp. 17–18

1.5 Extraversion

"Extraverts are highly responsive to potential rewards in their environments. They quickly spot & move toward the positive stimulation that they crave in order to accomplish their daily tasks & projects efficiently. This trait, too, has biogenic roots. We've seen the evidence in the fact that extraverts, relative to introverts, perform better on cognitive tasks involving anagrams or short-term memory when their brains are aroused by chemical stimulants such as caffeine. Conversely, they do worse if they ingest a sedative such as alcohol.

Extraverts' musical preferences turn to the loud, pulsing, & energizing. Partly because of their need for stimulation & their focus on the potential for reward rather than punishment, extraverts are more likely to have brushes with authority like getting traffic tickets or, earlier in their lives, being sent, repeatedly, to their rooms.¹⁰

1 of the most stimulating situations for extraverts is social interaction, & they engage with such encounters readily. Indeed, among the most intensely stimulating social activities are sexual ones – extraverts have been shown to have greater frequency & diversity of sexual experience than more introverted individuals. Introverts can take some comfort, however, in the fact that there is a quality/quantity trade-off in various types of task performance: Extraverts opt for quantity over quality & introverts the reverse. My introverted students tell me these results so apply to their sexual performance. I am open-minded but data-free on this speculation.¹¹

When it comes to the question of licking elbows, I strongly suspect that extraverted readers will have attempted to lick their own elbows. They may have also successfully licked the elbow of the person sitting next to them." – Little, 2017, p. 18

1.6 Agreeableness

1.7 Neuroticism

1.8 The Outer Sociogenic You

2 Personal Projects: The Doings of Personality

3 Personal Contexts: The Social Ecology of Project Pursuit

4 The Myth of Authenticity: The Challenge of Being Oneself

5 Well-Doing: The Sustainable Pursuit of Core Projects

References

Little, Brian R. (2017). *Who Are You, Really? The Surprising Puzzle of Personality*. TED Books. Simon & Schuster/TED, p. 96.

¹⁰There is a vast research literature on extraversion & its effects on performance, motivation, & risk-taking. An authoritative & comprehensive review has been carried out by Wilt & Revelle (2008).

¹¹The study of frequency of intercourse was originally reported in Giese & Schmidt (1968). I have been unable to find a more recent study, so I would caution the reader that these results were obtained from unmarried, heterosexual German university students who had reported being sexually active. And it was the sixties.