

Who Are You, Really? The Surprising Puzzle of Personality

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Contents

1 Scanning Your Personality: The Big Picture	2
2 Personal Projects: The Doings of Personality	2
3 Personal Contexts: The Social Ecology of Project Pursuit	2
4 The Myth of Authenticity: The Challenge of Being Oneself	2
5 Well-Doing: The Sustainable Pursuit of Core Projects	2
References	2

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.

" – Little, 2017, pp. 6–

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References

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