

# Who Are You, Really? The Surprising Puzzle of Personality

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## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 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

<sup>1</sup>This 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).

<sup>2</sup>The 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).

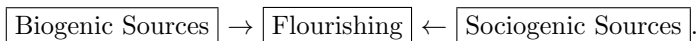
to its roots. What's more, that shift propelled me not only to think & feel new things but to act in new ways. This pursuit that I had chosen was, almost invisibly, reshaping the person I was. Projects like "sitting in" or "going to the demonstration" or "seeking justice" were now commitments – acts 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."<sup>3</sup>

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 delusional belief that other people are plotting your well-being or saying good things about you behind your back.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>3</sup>See Lone Frank (2011).

<sup>4</sup>The 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).

## 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.” – Little, 2017, p. 14

## 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.

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<sup>5</sup>There 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.