



Personality: What Makes Me “Me” – What Makes You “You”?

by JUDY BERANGER

Personality is the unique “You” that is readily apparent to others. The Psychological Association says that personality refers to individual differences in the way we tend to think, feel and behave. The study of personality focuses on two broad areas: understanding how the various qualities of a person come together as a whole and understanding individual differences, such as characteristics like sociability or irritability. As teachers, our internal voice is steadily remarking on the variations in our own personalities and behaviors as well as that of our students, colleagues, family members, friends and others with whom we interact. As difficult as it can sometimes be, consistent reflection on this internal voice allows for growth opportunities. It can deepen our understanding, reduce competitiveness and heighten our compassion and acceptance of the many differences and uniqueness of each person. Instead of “what a strange guy he is...” we can choose to reframe: “I wonder what is going on with that person that he acts that way. Maybe he is going through/has gone through a lot more than I can ever imagine.”

What the research has in common as to the reasons why we vary so much in personality types are:

- differences in genes;
- differences in our experiences;
- differences in our overall environment;
- differences in our mental health.

There have been numerous personality frameworks developed including the Myers-Briggs Indicator, the Enneagram framework, John Holland’s six personality types, among others. Lucy Ash of BBC News contends there are about 2500 personality indicators on the market – many of which would have something to teach us and assist us in deepening our understanding of who we are, of why we do certain things, and about our default thinking patterns. Learning and trusting ourselves while focusing on at least one action goal that deepens our awareness of what keeps us at our best is a realistic goal. Personality indicators create self-awareness and uncover patterns of behaviour that sub-consciously

drive and motivate us to act in certain ways. Here is an example that, unfortunately, may sound familiar to many: *Mannie tells his colleague Murtha about the fantastic job Cullington is doing as department head. Murtha, struggling with self esteem issues all her life, is unconsciously and automatically threatened by Mannie’s comments. She replies with disparaging remarks about Cullington and works hard at diminishing Mannie’s compliment. Had Murtha done a little self reflection on her internal reactions, she could have used this as an opportunity for growth and echoed Mannie’s life-giving statements about Cullington, which she herself had experienced, even though she didn’t want to acknowledge that fact. Some people seem unwilling to recognize or explore why such negativity lives within them.*

We can learn from the wise words of Audre Lorde: “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” One teacher used the example that, for her, personality is to a person like scent is to a flower.

Five Personality Traits

Striving towards a greater understanding of who we are, and who we want to become, is a strategy that will result in an enhanced sense of purpose and well-being. The National Institute of Health, along with several universities in the US, have worked together to review and research personality programs with a view to uncovering the core ingredients that make up personality. Their conclusion was that an individual’s overall personality was determined by where they fit on the following five trait continuums of:

1. introversion/extraversion
2. openness/rigidness
3. conscientiousness/indifference
4. agreeableness/disagreeableness
5. emotional stability/instability

The introversion/extraversion continuum is likely the most recognizable personality trait. Finding oneself toward the centre of this scale allows for flexibility of movement from introverted to extraverted, ensuring the ability to move in either direction as

situations and job expectations require. This allows a person to thrive when working with others. Going further along the continuum into introversion on one end or extraversion on the other, creates growing neediness, less balance and greater challenges for those who work with these extremes.

People high in openness are imaginative, creative, perceptive, adaptable, curious, resilient and appreciative. They can flourish in unpredictable and volatile situations. Those low in openness (rigidity) are the opposite and have low toleration for change.

People who are conscientious are dependable, value time, have a strong sense of duty and work ethic and plan their time well. They are highly productive, disciplined, decisive and achievement-focused. They meet job expectations and take the good along with the more challenging. People low in conscientiousness (indifference) are more likely to coast and glide along in their work, picking and choosing how to spend their time, and leaving the lion's share to others who will pick up the slack. They act as if they are meeting their job and family expectations and can be quite convincing.

Agreeableness measures the extent of a person's warmth and kindness. The more agreeable someone is, in the true sense of the word, the more likely they are to be trusting, helpful and compassionate. The more a person moves along the continuum towards disagreeableness, the more likely they are to be cold, negative, suspicious, less cooperative and envious. Being envious, which can lead to people being perceived as not agreeable, was found to be a common personality type in the August 2016 *Journal of Science Advances*. The research found that envious people feel threatened when someone else is more successful. A positive comment about a person can, for no apparent reason, trigger a defensive, negative comment from someone high on the disagreeable side.

People high on the emotional stability scale are compassionate, sensitive, other-oriented and even-keeled. Those people who move further to the instability side are much less compassionate and other-oriented and have been linked with challenging health issues. The further on the instability continuum the more likely people tend to be negative in their self-talk and experience higher bouts of anxiety and depression, turning to addictive and dysfunctional behaviours to ease their nerves. They worry frequently, easily slipping into anxiety and depression. Sadly, if all is going well, they will find other worries. (The term often used by scientists for this emotional stability/instability trait is "neuroticism," a word, that sometimes holds negative connotations and can be misunderstood.)

Personality Can Change

There is ongoing debate as to whether personality can change to engender a higher quality of life. A study at the University of Illinois reviewed 207 published research papers, (*Psychological Bulletin*, January 2017). It concluded that therapy may indeed alter personality. Psychologist/researcher, Brent Roberts, maintains that if we are willing to focus on one aspect of our self, and willing to go at it systematically, there is now "increased optimism that we may affect change in that domain." Something as purposeful as overcoming resentment against others and practicing forgiveness can go a long way to strengthening personality and overall health.

Although we can never change genetics or our family of origin, we can have input into how we grow as people. We can change some of the characteristics in our personality that cause us unhappiness. We can impact how we feel inside. We do need to be mindful that if an untreated mental health issue is present, the capacity to improve personality is much more limited. A physician should be involved along with counselling, Employee Assistance Programs and other therapies when a person is ready.

In *Anne of Green Gables*, Lucy Maud Montgomery addresses the complexities of personality. Her character, Anne says, "There's such a lot of different Anne's in me. I sometimes think that is why I'm such a troublesome person. If I was just the one Anne it would be ever so much more comfortable, but then it wouldn't be half so interesting." Any tool that can assist in promoting a sense of peace and internal honesty that translates into more meaningful relationships at home and at school is worth exploring. Being true to how we are thinking and feeling, and especially in how we treat ourselves and each other, is necessary. Strengthening our personality through self-reflection, followed by meaningful action, gives us greater quality of life and provides opportunities to make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others.

Awareness of self followed by a sincere desire to change are the forerunners of personal growth. Electing to improve in one area will likely affect the whole self. Most of us have times when we feel stuck, disappointed, lack passion and focus, inspiration and motivation. Understanding more about what makes you "you" and what makes me "me" can enhance our character and improve our sensitivities, making the rest of our careers the best of our careers.

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