

DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY

Lesson 13

PERSONALITY AND TEMPERAMENT

What is Personality?

Think of a friend who you know will react in a certain way to a certain situation. For example, perhaps in a room full of people, you know that person will stand in the background and say nothing. Or maybe you know someone else who you can predict will get right into the middle of the crowd and stop talking only when it's time to leave.

Definition of Personality

The idea that each of us behaves, thinks and feels in a regular and predictable way is at the heart of psychology. However, each of us is different from everybody else. This idea of a *consistent* and *unique* set of characteristics that describes an individual is what psychologists mean by “personality”. This includes:

- **Behaviour:** how does the person usually behave?
- **Emotions:** the typical feelings and moods of a person
- **Thoughts:** a person's typical thoughts.

An important aspect of the idea of personality is that it is *long-term*. We may sometimes behave “out of character” but personality includes the idea that our typical behaviours, emotions and thoughts remain fairly consistent throughout our life.

Jot down an answer to this. Take the example of the two people in the box above at a party. What would you think are each one's typical behaviours, emotions and thoughts at that party? Complete the table below to provide your suggestion. Then compare yours to the suggestion in the Feedback section at the end of this lesson.

Person	Behaviour	Emotions	Mental Activity
First Person	Stands at edge of group. Does not start conversations.	Anxious in large groups. Worried. Slightly unhappy.	Thinking about what others think of me. Will anyone talk to me?
Second Person			

Table 13.1 Personalities of Two People at a Party – Blank

Because personality is a set of consistent characteristics – they do not change from situation to situation – people behave in a largely predictable way. For example, the imaginary person described in the box, above, who stays quietly at the back in a crowded room has a characteristic “shyness”. This characteristic allows us to predict that he or she will wait for others to say hello in most similar situations rather than saying hello first.

Bags of Personality?

Psychologists do not use the word personality in that way. While it might be common for people to say someone has “bags of personality”, that is not what psychologists mean when they use the word. For psychologists, everybody has equal “amounts” of personality but everyone’s personality is different.

Personality Tests?

This is another no-no for psychologists. While some psychologists use questionnaires to “measure” someone’s personality, these are not tests that are passed or failed. They just allow the psychologist to see the unique position of a person

So What is Temperament?

The idea of temperament is very close indeed to the idea of personality. Essentially, some psychologists believe that we are born with a disposition to behave in a certain way right from the time we are babies – which, of course, is a type of personality. This is our temperament. This idea has some criticisms. We shall look at criticisms and alternative ideas later in the lesson.

Many parents with at least two children will tell you that each of them is different, despite being brought up in the same family and treated equally by their parents. This is the sort of basis on which the idea of temperament is built. Parents often say their babies have had their own personality from the moment they were born. You can find out more about temperament at www.temperament.com.

First, let us look at the evidence for Temperament. We will look at three studies: firstly, the work of Thomas and Chess; secondly, the work of Buss and Plomin; and finally, that of Kagan.

1. Thomas and Chess's Model of Temperament

In 1956 Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess set up the New York Longitudinal Study (NYLS) in New York, USA. The study collected data on the children for over 30 years.

Studies of Temperament 1

Key Study: Thomas and Chess, 1956-1988, New York Longitudinal Study

Reason why the study was conducted: to see if children were predisposed to behave in a particular way that continued throughout their childhood.

Method used: the parents of 141 children in 85 families were asked to observe and describe the behaviour of their own children. They were asked to record what the child did and how he or she did it. Parents were asked to pay special attention to the child's reaction to new things – e.g. the first bath – and then subsequent reactions to it over a period of time to see if there were any changes.

When the children went to nursery and to school, the staff and teachers were interviewed about the child's behaviour and the researchers made some direct observations themselves. They also tested the children at the ages of three and six. Most of the information came from parents, however.

The observations for this first study started in 1956 and carried on until 1962. The researchers conducted further studies on these same children into their teenage years and adulthood and published their results in 1977.

Results obtained: their results were that all the behaviours reported could be put into nine categories. Also, most (but not all) children can be fitted into one of three groups, or Temperaments, based on collections of the categories of behaviour found in the study. These are:

- **The Easy Child:** has a mild mood, quickly develops a regular sleep and eating pattern, takes to most new foods easily, adapts to school easily and accepts most frustrating situations without fussing.
- **The Difficult Child:** needs a long time to adjust to new routines, people, or situations, and has relatively frequent and loud periods of crying. Laughter, also, tends to be loud. Frustration often produces a violent tantrum.
- **The Slow-to-Warm-Up Child:** when exposed to the new situation repeatedly, this child gradually shows quiet and positive interest and involvement.

Conclusions drawn: the researchers concluded that the children had a temperament – a tendency to behave in a particular way – from a very early age.

This was the first *modern* model of temperament (the ancient Greeks were the first to use the idea of temperament).

Evaluation of the Thomas and Chess study

The sample

The sample is the group of people studied. To be any good, the sample needs to represent the people we want to draw conclusions about (more about this in the Methods of Control lesson, later in the textbook). As psychologists in the United Kingdom, we want to be able to say something about the people in the United Kingdom.

Strengths of the Sample:

- It was a good size.
- About half were boys and half were girls so that is fairly even and represents both sexes quite well.

Weaknesses of the sample

- The children were mostly middle-class and from American families originally from Europe, though there were also two or three children from families originally from Puerto Rico in the Caribbean.
- 78 per cent were Jewish, 15 per cent were Catholic and 7 per cent were Protestant.

Although later studies included children from working class, Puerto-Rican families and children with disabilities for comparison, we can see that the original sample only really represented children from an American-European background and was heavily biased towards

American Jewish culture. It may not be possible, therefore, to apply the findings to other American cultures and ethnic groups or to the UK. By “culture” we mean the way of behaving, beliefs, values, and so on. These can be quite different between different ethnic and religious groups and between the UK and the USA.

- A research team led by Super and Harkness recently studied 304 families in 6 countries and the USA. They found in general that 8 of the 9 categories of behaviour identified by the NYLS could be reliably measured in each country – so this is some evidence that perhaps the NYLS could be applied to all cultures.

The data

Most of the information was collected from the parents of the children.

Strength of the Data

- Parents have access to lots of information about their children that other researchers may not be able to see and record; a rich collection of data provides more evidence to support conclusions of a study.

Weakness of the Data

- The data are probably biased because parents may notice only certain behaviours. For example, they may only see the “good” things about their children (or even only the “bad”). Also, even if they notice other things, they may be reluctant to report some information about the child to the researchers.

Overall

There are many problems with this study. The sample was not representative of UK children or even of all American children. The information collected was probably biased towards the parents’ views of their children. Finally, this study resulted in the concept of the “Difficult Child” and suggested that a proportion (about 10 per cent) of our children are born “difficult”. Does that seem reasonable?

2. Buss and Plomin’s Genetic Approach to Temperament

If we do have a temperament when we are born and if it stays constant as we develop, then it is likely that it has some connection with our genes. Buss and Plomin’s work examines this idea. They defined temperament as inherited personality traits (characteristics or features) that are present in early childhood. They see three essential traits:

- **Emotionality:** mainly fear and anger but including other emotions.
- **Activity:** how active is the child? The opposite is passive.
- **Sociability:** the tendency to prefer being in the company of others.

Buss and Plomin developed a questionnaire that allowed people to rate children on each of these three traits. This is known as the EAS Temperament Questionnaire.

Studies of Temperament 2

Key Study: Buss and Plomin, 1984, Study of Twins

Reason why the study was conducted: to see if identical twins were closer in their temperaments than non-identical twins.

Method used: the parents of 228 identical twins and 177 non-identical twins rated their children on the EAS temperament questionnaire.

[Identical twins result from a single egg duplicating itself in the womb. They inherit identical genes from their parents. Non-identical (or fraternal) twins are the result of two separate eggs fertilised in the womb at the same time. They only inherit the same similarity in genes as do brothers and sisters who are born at different times.]

Results obtained: identical twins' temperaments were similar while non-identical twins were less so.

Conclusion: the temperaments of the children were inherited. This is because those children with the same genes (identical twins) were shown to have similar temperaments while those with different genes (non-identical twins) had less similar temperaments.

Evaluation of the Buss and Plomin Study of Twins

Strength

- The use of identical and non-identical twins is a very good way of looking for the effects of genes. It gives two clear groups of genetically similar and genetically different children.

Weaknesses

- We cannot necessarily rely on parental ratings of child behaviour.
- A study by Bishop, Spence and MacDonald in 2003 showed a very poor correspondence between descriptions of children's behaviour given by teachers and observations of the behaviour made by scientists. In the case of twins, there is a further pressure; it is a popular, cultural belief that identical twins are similar in many ways and it is possible that parents *expect* to see the same behaviours in these children and may ignore differences, exaggerating similarities in identical twins.

- At the same time, research has shown there are “contrast” effects in parents’ observations of their children in which they tend to exaggerate differences between them and this may be more powerful for non-identical twins, thus exaggerating temperament differences in these ratings.

Temperament and Personality

An important feature of Buss and Plomin’s model of temperament is that they saw temperament as capable of being modified. They thought that as babies and children start to interact with their environment, there would be changes brought in the behaviour, emotions and thinking of children and that this would continue throughout life. In this case then, we are not born with a fixed way of behaving that stays with us for the rest of our lives but we are born with a tendency to behave one way at the start and to change as we interact with our environment.

3. Kagan and Snidman’s Biological Approach to Temperament

[Please note that the AQA specification attributes this work only to Kagan but it was actually undertaken and disseminated by both Kagan and Snidman]

This explanation of temperament is very close to the genetic approach. Jerome Kagan and Nancy Snidman noted that children with particular types of behaviour also had particular types of biological features. These biological features were, in turn, probably the result of their genetic makeup.

Studies of Temperament 3

Key Study: Kagan and Snidman, 1991, Study of Shyness

Reason why the study was conducted: to see if children who showed a reaction of crying and high levels of movement to new things around them at an early age also showed shyness later in life

Method used: the researchers studied 94 4-month-old children who showed a high level of reaction and crying to new events (the “high reactivity” group). They compared their level of shyness to infants who did not show these reactions (the “low reactivity group”) at ages 9 and 14 months.

Results obtained: at the later ages, children who had been in the high reactivity group also showed much more shyness and those who had been in the low reactivity group showed less shyness.

Conclusion: the researchers concluded that the children’s shyness could be predicted from the level of reactivity of the child at a very early age.

Brain specialists at that time had shown that reactivity was associated with particular structures in the brain (mostly a structure called the amygdala). Kagan and Snidman therefore suggested that shyness is part of a temperament governed by a brain structure that also governs reactivity in infancy. This is evidence of a biological basis to temperament.

The researchers also pointed to other aspects of biology that supported the idea of a biological basis to shyness. For example, they said that shy children and their immediate relatives tend to have blue eyes, while children who are not shy tend to have brown eyes. They also found that when they stand up from a seated position, shy children have larger rises in blood pressure and heart rate.

So, is Personality Fixed at Birth by Our Genes and Biology?

As you read in the section on Buss and Plomin's work, they believe that temperament can be modified by our experiences as we go through life and develop our personality. Psychologists like Carl Rogers concentrate on the way we can change and grow as people. In particular, we can reach our full potential – self-actualise – if our basic needs are already met. Also, studies of learning – in particular, operant conditioning – show how our environment can shape our behaviour.

Check Your Understanding. Write down your answers. Check them against the suggested answers in the **FEEDBACK** section. Record your marks in your **Assessment Record**.

1. What three consistent and unique characteristics do psychologists include when they refer to personality? [1 mark]
2. What do psychologists mean by temperament? [1 mark]
3. What three temperament types did the Thomas and Chess study find? [1 mark]
4. Give one strength of the Thomas and Chess study. [2 marks]
5. In Buss and Plomin's study, what difference did they find between identical and non-identical twins? [1 mark]
6. Give one weakness of the Buss and Plomin study. [2 marks]
7. True or false? Buss and Plomin thought that temperament could be modified by interaction with the environment. [1 mark]
8. What did Kagan and Snidman conclude is the basis of temperament? [1 mark]

FEEDBACK

Answers to *Check Your Understanding*

One suggestion for the personalities of the two people at that party in Table 13.1

Person	Behaviour	Emotions	Mental Activity
First Person	Stands at edge of group. Does not start conversations.	Anxious in large groups. Worried. Slightly unhappy.	Thinking about what others think of me. Will anyone talk to me?
Second Person	Jumps right into the middle of the party and starts to talk to people.	Relaxed and happy.	Who do I know here? Who should I start a conversation with? I like that shirt.

Table 13.2 Personalities of Two People at a Party – Suggestions

1. Behaviour, Emotions and Thoughts. [1 mark]
2. The part of our personality with which we are born. [1 mark]
3. The easy child, the difficult child and the slow-to-warm-up child. [1 mark]
4. (e.g.) The data were collected by parents and they could collect lots of data to which teachers and researchers did not have access. [1 mark] so researchers could base conclusions on good levels of data. [1 further mark]
5. Identical twins tended to have temperaments that were more similar than the temperaments of non-identical twins. [1 mark]
6. (e.g.) Parents may have a tendency to exaggerate the extent to which non-identical twins are different. [1 mark] This would cause the data collected on the twins to be inaccurate so the conclusions of the study would not be valid. [1 further mark]
 [Total 2 marks]
7. True. [1 mark]
8. (e.g.) brain structures. [1 mark]