

# Rethinking Personality

- by Robert Hogan

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## Philosophy of Science

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A fundamental problem with most personality theories is how they deal with the philosophy of science. There is a difference between prediction and explanation – what people do and why they do it. What are we trying to predict? Behavior. How do we explain it? Some want to explain it in terms of traits. But there are no traits, they can't find them, tell you how much they weigh, or where they live. I'm saying you explain it in terms of people's intentions. For Trait Theory, it's due to neural hormonal excretions in your brain. For me, it's because people have agendas. That is why they do what they do. They are trying to get somewhere, and you can't reduce agendas down to neural hormonal excretions oozing and squishing in your brain.

I would argue that what's inside your head is the residue of what just happened in the outside world. What's happening inside your head doesn't cause what's happening out there, it reflects it. Trait Theory says that all the action is inside the mind. Individual differences in social skills are irrelevant. Is there a trait for social skill? No. So, social skill as a concept doesn't exist in Trait Theory. But what is the most important factor driving individual differences in interpersonal performance? Social skill.

And for Trait Theory, self-knowledge comes through introspection. You sit around and think about yourself and reflect. It's the same with Freud and Jung. So, everything important happens inside your head. I would argue that self-knowledge is the result of reflecting on social interaction. If you just sit in a vacuum and reflect on yourself, there's nothing to reflect on. How your mother treated you? How your sister treated you? How your dog treated you? The way kids beat you up on the playground? For me it's all out there, it's not in here.

## Socioanalytic Theory

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Ideas have consequences. And it makes a difference what point of view you buy into. Everything follows from those ideas. Trait Theory is just something that comes out in a factor analysis, but there is no content. Freud at least had some ideas. My point of view is that you have to get outside of your own biography and think about people in general. Freud's thoughts were just based on his own biography.

What is the outside perspective? Anthropology, Sociology, primate field studies, and Evolutionary Psychology are all about thinking about people in general. And when you do that, you see three things. First, people evolved as group living animals. People always lived in groups. Solitary primates don't make it through the night. Second, nearly every group has a status hierarchy. Chicken flocks have a status hierarchy. Shrimp colonies have status hierarchies. Status is a biological universal. And finally, there is constant competition within groups for status – who's in, who's out, who's up, who's down. That is what Psychologists focus on. But there is also constant competition between groups for survival. That's what really matters and what Psychologists don't focus on.

At a very deep level, people need social acceptance and respect, and they find rejection immensely stressful (cf. Bowlby, 1969). People want to be accepted, respected and, embraced, and they find any kind of rejection really stressful. People also want status and power and control of resources. And they find the loss of that quite stressful. My original piece of hard data for this was from a Psychiatrist named Marmot who did a study with the British Civil Services (Marmot, 2006). The higher you are in the status hierarchy, the better your life. The lower you are, the more stressful your life.

And these directly relate to fitness, which in biological terms, has to do with the progeny you leave behind. Biological fitness isn't how much fun you're having, but how well your children do. The more acceptance you have within the group, the more social support you have, the more people are willing to loan you money. And the more status and power you have, the better off your kids are going to do. That's fitness. So these issues and problems are biologically mandated. It's not biologically mandated that you're neurotic. It is biologically mandated that you go try to recruit people to support you.

So the big goals in life concern getting along and getting ahead. And the goal of assessment is to predict individual differences in the ability to do that, usually at work. Career and life success absolutely depend on the ability to get along and get ahead. What other criteria could matter? The degree to which you are self-actualized? How much do differences in self-actualization make?

This is how people are alike. They want to be loved and they want to be famous. But how are they different? They are different in three consequential ways. People are different in terms of how they think about themselves, which is their identity. Identity directs their behavior. Who you think you are determines what you are going to do and how you're going to do it. Your identity says I'll take this job and I won't take that job. People also differ in how other people think about them. That's the payoff. Reputation is what drives everything of consequence in life. And they differ in terms of social skill. Social skill is what brings identity in line with reputation. Who do you think you are, and who do they think you are? Social skill is what brings those two together.

\* This is a series of excerpts from a speech Robert Hogan delivered at the 2016 WAPP conference in Brazil. In addition, Robert Hogan and Jeff Foster used the speech as the foundation for writing the "Rethinking Personality" paper published in the International Journal of Personality Psychology in 2016.

#### References

- 1 Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- 2 Marmot, M. (2006). *The status syndrome*. New York, NY: Holt.