

Is there a 'Work' Personality or is the concept misconceived?

Roy Childs

Team Focus Limited

Abstract

There are significant questions about the way traditional psychometrics conceives or defines personality. This paper considers the need to rethink what we mean by personality and suggests that the existing psychometric paradigm is not helpful in addressing the fact that people show considerable flexibility in their behaviour. It points to a need to separate the concept of personality from behaviour. As part of this process it describes the Type Mapping model which defines three domains - the inner or personal, the outer or contextual and the way these affect behaviour. Using the Type Mapping tools, evidence is presented which suggests that people do not simply behave according to their inner personality preferences which supports the contention that we need a better separation between the concept of identity and how it influences behaviour in different circumstances. Hence the traditional concept of an 'average personality' based on 'typical behaviours' in an 'average of situations' is challenged. The goal is to better understand how people manage to flex - and sometimes fail to flex - depending on circumstances. The concept of helping people to adapt and flex has an urgency since change is happening at an ever increasing rate. The challenges of ever increasing globalisation, accelerating information overload and rapidly changing technology all emphasise our interdependence and interconnectedness leading to the need for increasing collaboration. Both psychometrics and psychology need to step up to the challenge with new thinking that addresses a more dynamic view of how people collaborate.

What is personality?

The field of Psychology has wrestled with the question 'what is personality?' for many years. It is at the heart of the field of study known as Individual Differences – which can be studied through a number of lenses. This paper focuses on the issues arising from the attempt to understand personality through the psychometric lens.

Most Psychologists and Psychometricians would agree that the concept of 'personality' must involve the concept of consistency – both over time and across situations. This is because people can respond very differently to the same stimulus – and the reason for that difference has to be something inside the individual (regardless of whether this has been created by experience or is based on differences in DNA). However, that may describe the limit of general agreement since there is considerable disagreement about precisely **what** needs to be consistent and **how much** consistency to expect. These issues are elaborated below:

- a. **What needs to be consistent?** For many years there has been a lack of consensus about the fundamental building blocks of personality. What are the traits that adequately represent individual differences in this field - and how many are needed to do the job adequately? The spawning of various questionnaires with disparate labels led to a period of more rigorous investigation such as the work of Hans Eysenckⁱ and Ray Cattellⁱⁱ who came up with different solutions (i.e. 3 main factors versus 16 'primary' factors). This early work was attempting to address a major question about what should be measured and Cattell explained the proliferation of questionnaires with many different labels as a failure to
 - i. use the appropriate Factor Analytic methodology
 - ii. separate source traits (the underlying basic factors of an individual's personality) from surface traits (the visible characteristics arising from the complex interaction of source traits). To make a chemical analogy we can consider source traits to be the elements of which there are relatively few whereas surface traits are like compounds of which there are a huge number.

The issue of surface versus source traits has either been neglected or assumed to be unnecessary given the emergence of an overarching model of personality known as the Big Five. However, the Big Five approach and model leaves open key issues such as whether we are addressing the consistency of real life behaviour or the consistency of self-report. A further issue that remains unaddressed is the relationship between behaviour and personality. Should contextual behaviour – which can demonstrate flexibility – be factored in to the concept of personality or should we separate out the difference between behaviour and identity?

- b. **How much consistency should we expect?** Without answers to some of the issues raised above, it becomes very hard to evaluate the question of change which is a factor of both time and place – and which necessarily impacts the nature vs. nurture controversy.

What do personality questionnaires really measure?

Psychometric personality questionnaires are very seductive. They usually produce a profile with attractive labels backed up by claims (and some evidence) of high reliability, all supported by a psychometric methodology that is well established. Since the psychometric model has been largely unchanged for decades and unchallenged even from within the profession, the lay audience is pre-disposed to believe/accept the science behind it. However, given significant questions about the very nature of personality there is a degree of complacency and uncritical acceptance of existing approaches. Personality questionnaires can be critiqued from 3 main standpoints as follows:

1. **Is the theory about what is being measured sound?** Since the work of Eysenck and Cattell the development of many personality questionnaires has been in retreat. Searching for fundamental source traits is harder to do and less attractive to a purchasing public than creating ‘shopping lists’ of ‘competencies’ with attractive labels that people think they understand. This is akin to alchemy versus chemistry – attractive labels versus obscure elements. Is reliance on the Big Five model to provide the justification for such scales sufficient? In fact, is the Big Five which is based on the correlations between self-report scales an adequate model of personality?
2. **Is self-report an acceptable basis for measuring personality?** There are clearly situations where self-report would not be recognised as a good basis for making measurement. Imagine trying to make a valid measurement of memory. The self-report approach might ask a person to rate statements such as:
 - a. I have a good memory
 - b. I tend to be forgetful
 - c. I remember things very easily
 - d. At times I forget things that I have only recently read or heard
 - e. I learn and retain information better than most people
 - f. People would say that I have an exceptionally good memory

It is likely that such a 'psychometric test' would provide raw scores across the 6 to 36 range and would probably achieve coefficient alphas of 0.80 to 0.90. Now persuade 20,000 people to complete it and it can be published with norms using a sten scale or even a percentile and a technical manual to explain the process with factor analyses and coefficient alphas to please everybody. In fact, I am convinced that, in time, we could collect some small correlations with a valid measure of memory simply because people usually have some level of insight and honesty. However, few people would then argue that we have a good measure of memory and yet the same approach for concepts such as persuasiveness or decisiveness or emotional intelligence is commonplace.

3. **Is the psychometric methodology suitable for a dynamic theory of personality?** The Psychometric approach is founded on the concept of consistency – which has unfortunately been renamed reliability. This helps the purveyors of tests because no-one wants an unreliable one. However, no-one is keen on consistency when it masks real change. Hence, the psychometric methodology is predicated on the assumption that personality does not change – and questionnaires go further in assuming that a person's self-report about their personality (behaviour or identity) should be consistent. Items that do not reveal this truth are rejected. This is a self-fulfilling process and theorists who view personality as more dynamic are uncomfortable with the psychometric assumptions and limitations.

This critique does not mean that self-report questionnaires have no value – simply that they have a different value than is often perpetrated. Self-report questionnaires are useful because, in practice, people are surprisingly poor at describing themselves. A good self-report questionnaire can provide insight both for the individual and for 'third parties.' Hence, if we stop regarding such instruments as 'measures' and more as 'methods for extracting a person's autobiographical narrative' we are likely to be closer to the mark. Perhaps it is time to remind ourselves that:

1. self-report questionnaires deal with soft numbers and not hard measures
2. self-report questionnaires reflect dynamic processes not static constructs
3. our personalities (deliberately plural) can be engaged or inhibited by different contexts
4. the concept of a trait (and hence the 'a position on a scale') is just a model

5. the concept of a 'type' is also just a model
6. some people are extremely good at 'stretching' beyond any 'natural' disposition
7. the outcomes we want to predict are multifactorial and changing

It is because there are so many moving parts our methods for validation (and, for that matter, reliability) are woefully inadequate.

How can we use self-report more realistically?

This is not a time to abandon self-report which is not only an extremely quick and efficient way to collect data but also an important lens from which to start any process of selection or development. However, we need to recognise that most people do not see themselves as a static 'type' or 'trait'. Most people recognise that they can flex and stretch which means answering questions in terms of 'average' or 'typical' can produce some resistance since 'the average' is a theoretical abstraction. By analogy, imagine taking one of Mozart's symphonies and reducing it to the average pitch of the notes - this would be a very unfair way to describe the masterpiece! Hence one option is to allow people to express their behavioural range. In the context of work, this can be to express their work behaviour. It may be a step too far to call this a 'work personality' – in fact it is much closer to the definition of a work role. The confusion between personality and role is discussed in the article 'Do Team Building approaches need to change in 21st Century'ⁱⁱⁱ contrasting the OPQ and Belbin's Team Roles.

If we give people an opportunity to express their role behaviour (which can change according to context) this changes the emphasis on typical behaviour often found in personality questionnaires to an emphasis on preference which is closer to the concept of identity. Once we have introduced the concept of identity it is a natural step to explore the concept of the ideal self – a concept that has been much neglected or even shunned in psychometrics. And yet the concept of 'who I would like to be' gets to the core of a person – their identity, hopes, fears and motivations.

These different ways of addressing a person's identity have been operationalised by the Type Mapping system. Based on Carl Jung's concept of Psychological Type the Type Mapping system consists of five different questionnaires designed to separate the three domains – the inner world of preferences and aspirations, the outer world of context and challenges and the space in-between which is where behaviour and interaction occur.

Specifically, the TDI® (Type Dynamics Indicator) identifies preferences and aspirations; the MTRi™ (Managing Team Roles Indicator) identifies people's behavioural contribution; the ITPQ™ (Ideal Task Profile Questionnaire) identifies the requirements for a given situation.

Evidence for the relationship between preferences and behaviour.

It is clear that people are different which means that they can be characterised by their typical styles, behaviours and reactions. However, it is also clear that people adapt to circumstances and some people show great flexibility in this. This section explores the degree to which people's preferences match their behavioural contribution using the TDI and the MTRi. Below are three hypotheses that derive from the Type Mapping model:

1. that people with particular underlying preferences are likely to find particular behaviours more natural or enjoyable. This derives out of the theory of Psychological Type as summarised below:

MTR-i™ behavioural role	TDI® preferences	Jungian "function-attitude"
Activating	ESTP and ESFP	Se - Extraverted Sensing
Clarifying	ISTJ and ISFJ	Si - Introverted Sensing
Harmonising	ESFJ and ENFJ	Fe - Extraverted Feeling
Campaigning	ISFP and INFP	Fi - Introverted Feeling
Exploring	ENFP and ENTP	Ne - Extraverted iNtuition
Innovating	INFJ and INTJ	Ni - Introverted iNtuition
Conducting	ESTJ and ENTJ	Te - Extraverted Thinking
Analysing	ISTP and INTP	Ti - Introverted Thinking

2. that people often try to find situations that allow them to express their underlying preferences more easily.
3. that most people can adapt their behaviour according to circumstances if they have the will and the skill.

Support for these hypotheses would provide construct validity for the Type Mapping model. However, contextual demands can pull people in a different direction from their personal preference and so we should not expect a simple relationship between the MTR-i™ and the TDI® (as described in the table under point 1 above). Nevertheless, taking point 2 above we may predict that underlying preference would show through in many roles and so we may predict that the relationships described in point 1 above should be elevated above the others. However, all correlations can only be descriptive and will reflect the degree to which people with certain personality preferences find themselves using those preferences in the contexts used when completing the MTR-i™. The table below is based on 324 people (40% Male, 60% Female, average age 45.48, SD of age 11.65, 90% white British adults) who completed both the TDI® and the MTR-i™ in a development context.

The table shows the correlations between scores for each of the eight roles and each of the 4 dimensions that define the person's reported underlying preference. The final two columns summarise the letters indicated by the correlations (actual) and the letters predicted from the theory underpinning the Type Mapping model:

Table 31: Correlations between TDI® and MTR-i® (N=324)							
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
	EI	SN	TF	JP	Letter	Actual	Predicted
MTR-i™ Harmonising	-0.19	-0.03	0.57	0.14	F	E_FP	E_F P
MTR-i™ Campaigning	0.02	-0.03	0.23	0.06	F	F	I_F J
MTR-i™ Exploring	-0.25	0.38	0.21	0.33	N	ENFP	E N _P
MTR-i™ Innovating	-0.01	0.62	0.14	0.41	N	_NFP	I N _P
MTR-i™ Activating	-0.07	-0.41	-0.15	-0.12	S	_STJ	E S _P
MTR-i™ Clarifying	0.26	-0.40	-0.34	-0.34	S	ISTJ	I S _J
MTR-i™ Conducting	0.11	-0.41	-0.34	-0.54	T	_STJ	E_ T J
MTR-i™ Analysing	0.22	0.23	-0.40	0.03	T	INT_	I_ T P

The last column (column 8) in the table above shows the letter preferences predicted by Type Theory with the theoretical dominant letter shown in bold blue. Column 7 shows the letter preference indicated by the actual correlations (taking account of whether it is positive or negative). The results show that, as predicted, there is a small but significant relationship between preference and behaviour. The boxes highlighted in green show the highest correlations are between the TDI® letter preference and the MTR-i™ behavioural role. Thus Harmonising is the behaviour most associated with the F preference (see column 8 – predicted) and the highest correlation (0.57) is between the role behaviour of Harmonising and the TDI® preference scale TF. Of the eight behaviours, seven show their

highest correlation with the letter preference predicted. This provides support for the construct validity of the Type Mapping model and supports how TDI® preferences influence (but do not always dominate) self-perceived 'in-role' behaviour.

It is interesting to note that Conducting is the role that is less closely related to the underlying preference. This may be explained by the stronger contextual pressure that exists for people in managerial positions who are expected to plan, organise and monitor activities to get results. This would suggest that many managers would expect to contribute Conducting behaviours when working in their team (see the distribution of Belbin team roles among UK manager^{iv}). Since the current sample is largely made up of middle and senior managers in the workplace, this is the behaviour that is most likely to be influenced by contextual pressure. These results provide some support for Type Mapping theory. Useful follow-on research would involve adding measures of satisfaction and effectiveness in the roles people play to see whether they increase as the match between preference and role increases. This could also help contribute to a better understanding of how effectively people can adapt appropriately to contextual demands in spite of personal preferences – which is an essential aspect of effective and sustainable leadership^v.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are significant questions about the way traditional psychometrics has adopted a narrow view of personality and has failed to separate preferences and behaviour. Behaviour (or average behaviour) is not personality - we are not what we do. Using tools from the Type Mapping system evidence is presented which shows that people may have preferences but that these do not determine what they do in particular circumstances. This suggests that separating preferences and identity from behaviour and giving due consideration to context may help people to understand what people do and how they flex according to circumstances. This challenges the traditional psychometric approach to personality and gives greater consideration to how people adapt - something that is increasingly urgent given the rate of change, increasing globalisation, information overload and rapidly changing technology. Our ever increasing interconnectedness means that collaboration is increasingly important and there is a need for psychology to step up to this challenge.

ⁱ Eysenck, H. J. (1991). Dimensions of personality: 16, 5, or 3?--Criteria for a taxonomic paradigm. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 12, 773-790.

ⁱⁱ Cattell, R. B. (1990). Advances in Cattellian personality theory. In L. A. Pervin (Ed.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (pp. 101-110). New York: Guilford.

ⁱⁱⁱ Childs R (2014). Do Team Building approaches need to change in 21st Century': Team Focus Limited

^{iv} S.G. Fisher T.A. Hunter W.D.K. Macrosson, (2000), The distribution of Belbin team roles among UK managers, *Personnel Review*, Vol. 29 Iss 2 pp. 124 - 140

^v Hawkins, P (2014). *Leadership Team Coaching: Developing Collective Transformational Leadership*. London: Kogan Page