Personality development
The development of the beliefs, moods, and behaviors that differentiate among people.

The concept of personality refers to the profile of stable beliefs, moods, and behaviors that differentiate among children (and adults) who live in a particular society. The profiles that differentiate children across cultures of different historical times will not be the same because the most adaptive profiles vary with the values of the society and the historical era. An essay on personality development written 300 years ago by a New England Puritan would have listed piety as a major psychological trait but that would not be regarded as an important personality trait in contemporary America.

Contemporary theorists emphasize personality traits having to do with individualism, internalized conscience, sociability with strangers, the ability to control strong emotion and impulse, and personal achievement.

An important reason for the immaturity of our understanding of personality development is the heavy reliance on questionnaires that are filled out by parents of children or the responses of older children to questionnaires. Because there is less use of behavioral observations of children, our theories of personality development are not strong.

There are five different hypotheses regarding the early origins of personality (see accompanying table). One assumes that the child’s inherited biology, usually called a temperamental bias, is an important basis for the child’s later personality. Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess suggested there were nine temperamental dimensions along with three synthetic types they called the difficult child, the easy child, and the child who is slow to warm up to unfamiliarity. Longitudinal studies of children suggest that a shy and fearful style of reacting to challenge and novelty predicts, to a modest degree, an adult personality that is passive to challenge and introverted in mood.

A second hypothesis regarding personality development comes from Sigmund Freud’s suggestion that variation in the sexual and aggressive aims of the id, which is biological in nature, combined with family experience, leads to the development of the ego and superego. Freud suggested that differences in parental socialization produced variation in anxiety which, in turn, leads to different personalities.

A third set of hypotheses emphasizes direct social experiences with parents. After World War II, Americans and Europeans held the more benevolent idealistic conception of the child that described growth as motivated by affectionate ties to others rather than by the narcissism and hostility implied by Freud’s writings. John Bowlby contributed to this new emphasis on the infant’s relationships with parents in his books on attachment. Bowlby argued that the nature of the infant’s relationship...
to the caretakers and especially the mother created a profile of emotional reactions toward adults that might last indefinitely.

A fourth source of ideas for personality centers on whether or not it is necessary to posit a self that monitors, integrates, and initiates reaction. This idea traces itself to the Judeo-Christian assumption that it is necessary to award children a will so that they could be held responsible for their actions. A second basis is the discovery that children who had the same objective experiences develop different personality profiles because they construct different conceptions about themselves and others from the same experiences. The notion that each child imposes a personal interpretation to their experiences makes the concept of self critical to the child’s personality.

An advantage of awarding importance to a concept of self and personality development is that the process of identification with parents and others gains in significance. All children wish to possess the qualities that their culture regards as good. Some of these qualities are the product of identification with each parent.

A final source of hypotheses regarding the origins of personality comes from inferences based on direct observations of a child’s behavior. This strategy, which relies on induction, focuses on different characteristics at different ages. Infants differ in irritability, three-year-olds differ in shyness, and six-year-olds differ in seriousness of mood. A major problem with this approach is that each class of behavior can have different historical antecedents. Children who prefer to play alone rather than with others do so for a variety of reasons. Some might be temperamentally shy and are uneasy with other children while others might prefer solitary activity.

The current categories of child psychopathology influenced the behaviors that are chosen by scientists for study. Fearfulness and conduct disorder predominate in clinical referrals to psychiatrists and psychologists. A cluster of behaviors that includes avoidance of unfamiliar events and places, fear of dangerous animals, shyness with strangers, sensitivity to punishment, and extreme guilt is called the internalizing profile. The cluster that includes disobedience toward parent and teachers, aggression to peers, excessive dominance of other children, and impulsive decisions is called the externalizing profile. These children are most likely to be at risk for later juvenile delinquency. The association between inability of a three-year-old to inhibit socially inappropriate behavior and later antisocial behavior is the most reliable predictive relation between a characteristic scene in the young child and later personality trait.

Influences on personality development

The influence comes from a variety of temperament but especially ease of arousal, irritability, fearfulness, sociability, and activity level. The experiential contributions to personality include early attachment relations, parental socialization, identification with parents, class, and ethnic groups, experiences with other children, ordinal position in the family, physical attractiveness, and school success or failure, along with a number of unpredictable experiences like divorce, early parental death, mental illness in the family, and supporting relationships with relatives or teachers.

The most important personality profiles in a particular culture stem from the challenges to which the children of that culture must accommodate. Most children must deal with three classes of external challenges: (1) unfamiliarity, especially unfamiliar people, tasks, and situations; (2) request by legitimate authority or conformity to and acceptance of their standards, and (3) domination by or attack by other children. In addition, all children must learn to control two important families of emotions: anxiety, fear, and guilt, on the one hand, and on the other, anger, jealousy, and resentment.

Of the four important influences on personality—identification, ordinal position, social class, and parental socialization—identification is the most important. By six years of age, children assume that some of the characteristics of their parents belong to them and they experience vicariously the emotion that is appropriate to the parent’s experience. A six-year-old girl identified with her mother will experience pride should mother win a prize or be praised by a friend. However, she will experience shame or anxiety if her mother is criticized or is rejected by friends. The process of identification has great relevance to personality development.

The child’s ordinal position in the family has its most important influence on receptivity to accepting or rejecting the requests and ideas of legitimate authority. First-born children in most families are most willing than later-borns to conform to the requests of authority. They are more strongly motivated to achieve in school, more conscientious, and less aggressive.

The child’s social class affects the preparation and motivation for academic achievement. Children from middle-class families typically obtain higher grades in school than children of working or lower-class families because different value systems and practices are promoted by families from varied social class backgrounds.

The patterns of socialization used by parents also influence the child’s personality. Baumrind suggests that parents could be classified as authoritative, authoritarian,