

Personality: What makes you the way you are

Daniel Nettle

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Reviewed by Dr. Tana Dineen, 2008

Did you know that “the personality” of the familiar garden bird, the great tit, has been given “what amount(s) to a personality test?” Or that “the personality characteristics” of the mischievous little fish, the guppy, have been studied intensely? Or that the lowly amoeba is acting on “positive emotions” when it tracks and ingests food?

All of this, and more, seems credible, relevant and meaningful to Daniel Nettle, a Reader in Psychology at the University of Newcastle, the author of *Personality*, which is his attempt to explain “what makes you the way you are.” An enthusiastic adherent of the currently popular five-factor model of personality, Nettle offers a mish-mash of evolutionary notions, neuroscience and behavioral genetics to bolster the theory.

In an early chapter, we learn that the beak of the finch mutates according to ecological conditions, that the aforementioned guppy’s “personality dimension is tantalizingly similar to human Neuroticism,” (78) and that “personality traits in humans are heritable, just as beak size in finches is.” (55) Then, in five individual chapters, he addresses each of the factors - extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness –as they relate to what sound like contrived clinical vignettes.

Nettle does all of this with a confidence that broaches on evangelical arrogance repeatedly telling the reader that “we know.” However, the “we” he speaks of does not include the general reader or even all other psychologists but refers rather to those like-minded individuals he deems to be “academically *respectable* psychologists.” (p.17) Having survived over two millennium of darkness in which “the field of personality research has been *plagued* by different people using different notions,” Nettle believes that now “we psychologists...at last have a set of personality concepts that is firmly based on evidence.” (p.9)

Relegated to the dustbin are the antiques of Hippocrates’ four temperaments: "Melancholic," "Sanguine", "Choleric" and "Phlegmatic" each described according to a

human body fluid, Sheldon's three human temperament types or *somatotypes* based on the three tissue layers: endoderm, mesoderm, and ectoderm and Pavlov's two-factor model of 'extremeness' and 'passivity.' Similarly swept aside are Meyers and Briggs' "Type Indicator" (MBTI), Cattell's 16 Personality Factors (16PF) and multitudes of other specific and general personality models. Now, thanks to the innovation of "self report" rating systems (he offers a 12 item questionnaire to assess the reader's personality) and the "modern computer" which can do factor analysis "in less than a second," Nettle proclaims that "we can quickly tidy the field up." While this tidying-up loses "a lot of information," he feels that the benefits of "reducing and simplifying the data" outweigh the costs despite Einstein's caution that "things should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." The amazing result is the Five Factor model; "the Christmas Tree" on which "all particular findings can be arranged" to satisfy Nettle's vision.

But this particular Christmas tree seems chintzy, laden with too many artificial, ornamental notions. While Nettle defines personality traits as "stable individual differences in the reactivity of mental mechanisms," (43) and "a way of being... with consequences for life outcomes," (48) he proceeds to stretch the concept beyond reason describing how specific behaviours of birds, mice and even the aforementioned lowly amoeba have their own personality characteristics. Muddling evolutionary processes, adaptation and situation-specific response patterns, he tries to explain such things as why women score higher in Agreeableness ("because the female response to threat is (to) 'tend-and-befriend'") while the lower-scoring male is more suited to the aggressive style of business executive positions.

As for higher scorers in Extraversion, Nettle states that they enjoy sex and romance, have a greater number of sexual partners and casual matings, like active sports, travel and novelty; all of which he ties to their pursuit of positive emotions (joy, desire, enthusiasm and excitement.) However, he believes, a dimension rather like Extraversion can be found "even in the spineless octopus."

When it comes to Neuroticism, greater "negative emotion" is the key that may find its expression in a wide variety of disorders including anxiety disorders, phobias, insomnia, low self-esteem, eating disorders, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (117). Depression, he conjectures, is the "flare up of the underlying

personality trait.” If there is a good side to this factor it is that it may discourage them from high risk-taking activities such as mountain climbing (he notes that “Climbing Everest is a very dangerous thing to do.”) and may foster creativity, since many artists and writers show clear signs of depression and Neuroticism (125).

Conscientiousness, Nettle defines as “the magnitude of reactivity of those mechanisms in the frontal lobe that serve to inhibit an immediate response in favour of a goal or rule.” Somehow, from this the author is able to conclude that low scorers are more inclined to drinking, drug use, gambling and law-breaking, where as high-scorers risk having Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder.

Perhaps unsettled by the idea that our brains are “wired” for these disorders and that our personalities have been predetermined by genetics and “early life influences,” he concludes the book with a feel-better chapter on how readers can give it a better “spin” – although it backhands those individuals with the diagnosis of high levels of Neuroticism. Here Nettle suggests strategies ranging from “exercise, yoga, and meditation, through cognitive behaviour therapy, to antidepressants and anti-anxiety medication. (241-2)

While the book abounds in such concocted and absurd examples of the interplay of these five factors with evolutionary theory, genetic and brain studies, one more deserves attention. Nettle states that “evolution (has) built into us a capacity to modulate our personalities in response to our health, intelligence, size, and attractiveness.” He continues: “For men, Extraversion increases with overall size, though this is not the case for women. This makes sense too, since perceived attractiveness and desirability increase with height for men, but not necessarily for women. Larger men also *seem to be slightly less nice*, on average, and *men with antisocial personality disorder are rather larger overall*. This is probably because large men have a much greater chance of getting away with the kind of persistent rule-breaking and confrontation that this disorder entails than more diminutive individuals have.” (231)

If this conjecture makes sense to you, you will enjoy the convoluted thinking of this author. If not, forget the book!