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WHOOOO ARE YOU, WHO WHO?

Every person possesses a unique and complex personality which can be somewhat difficult to analyze or explain. Why are we who we are? What factors have defined who we've become? There are many theories that work to explain these perplexing questions. Through analyzing the impact of our genetics and our surrounding environment, we can begin to formulate a plausible answer to these questions.

People have been speculating about the origins of their existence for thousands of years. In ancient Greece, Hippocrates, father of western medicine, abided by the theory of humorism. Humorism is a medicinal concept that believes each human body is different and therefore must be treated differently. In order to simplify this concept, observed personalities were separated into four general categories: Choleric, Sanguine, Melancholic, and Phlegmatic. Each category represents a predominant fluid in the body: choleric was yellow bile from the liver, sanguine was blood from the heart, melancholic was black bile from the kidneys, and phlegmatic was phlegm from the lungs (fourtemperaments.com). Pushing this theory even further, Hippocrates named these divisions the Four Temperaments, each fluid now representing a different type of personality. People who were categorized as Choleric were passionate, Sanguines were eager and optimistic, Melancholics were known for being doleful, and Phlegmatics were said to be calm. This was the beginning of humans questioning the variations between one another's personalities

and the significance of these differences. In the future, this newborn curiosity would turn into the study of psychology.

Eventually, those practicing medicinal methods realized that personality differences were not defined by what body fluid dominated a person, but rather by their character. This beckoned the question ‘What factors shape our personality?’ In many way, all humans are the same. We all share a similar circadian rhythm and skeletal structure. We all have human minds, capable of feeling various shades of emotion. However, it is impossible for two humans to share the same exact perspective or the same experiences. Thus, personality must be defined by both our genetics and the environment we grow up in. “Somewhere between these two — our common humanity and our unique individuality — lies personality. Personality is about our different ways of being human. How we are all variations on the same themes. How the human nature we all share manifests in different styles of thinking, feeling and acting.” (personalityspirituality.net).

Many would argue that your genetics have a predominant effect on who you become as a person. Although genetics influence the framework of who you could become, they are not solely responsible for the outcome. Personality can be defined as a complex trait determined by environment and genetic factors (study.com). From your parents, you receive a polygenic trait involving a multitude of genes forming a single behavioral trait (study.com). Determining whether a trait is genetic can be a tedious task because it is so difficult for environmental and behavioral factors not to intermingle and have a dual effect on your personality. Therefore, geneticists believe in heritability, the proportion of variation between individuals that is credited to their genetics. “To put it concisely, “all psychological traits are heritable” (Bouchard, Thomas). For example, depression can be brought on by stressful life events. However, not

everyone who experiences hardships falls under the weight of depression. There is a genetic link which causes certain individuals, who possess a specific trait, to become more susceptible to depression when faced with adversity. Therefore, our genetic makeup alters how we react to certain stimuli in our environment. Like depression, genetics play a dominant role in most psychiatric illnesses. One of the most commonly studied psychiatric illnesses, Schizophrenia, is mostly influenced by our DNA. “Schizophrenia is the most extensively studied psychiatric illness, and the findings consistently suggest a very high degree of genetic influence (heritability of about .80), mostly additive genetic influence, with no shared environmental influence” (Bouchard, Thomas). Sadly, one cannot control how impactful this disease is because you cannot manipulate the patient’s environment in order to deter the effects. Another trait that genetics influence is our intelligence: “Early in life, shared environmental factors are the dominant influence on IQ, but gradually genetic influence increases, with the effects of shared environment dropping to near zero” (Bouchard). Children cannot control the environment they are raised in and therefore cannot control the rate of their mental development. However, once aged into adults, environmental influences on intelligence dwindle. Whatever advantages or disadvantages could be attributed to these influences, they begin to fade in importance. According to Bouchard, the playing field levels and now the key impact on intelligence is an individual’s ancestry. Although our genetics play a key role in outlining the person we become, it is often very difficult to pinpoint which specific genes shape our personality.

Most of the data recorded from genetic experiments is from studying twins and the behavioral variations between them. Behavioral geneticists study repeated patterns of single nucleotide polymorphisms in order to determine whether or not a specific gene impacts a

personality trait (Psychology Today). Usually, the single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNP's) directly correlate with the production of neuropeptides. Neuropeptides are protein molecules that influence brain activity and are involved in various social behaviors. By comparing each twin's different SNP's, one is able to determine the heritability of each trait. One promising SNP was the GG variant of the oxytocin receptor gene rs53576. It is directly associated with increasing oxytocin receptors in the brain (psychologytoday.com). Some geneticists believe that "If we know what parts of personality that a specific neuropeptide influences, then its genetic variants should predict behavior in a similar fashion" (psychologytoday.com). They hypothesized that if they could understand complex variations in the SNP's on the oxytocin receptor gene, they could understand how oxytocin affects personality. Sadly, many were left frustrated and defeated due to the inability of the genes to replicate the same data. Thus, making their research unusable. Many have tried since to explain the correlation of genetics and behavior but there is still no clear answer as to how exactly our genes influence our personality. However, future research is promising in explaining this mystery. Imagine that your genetic makeup designs a blueprint for your personality with unique traits that only you have. However, your environment and various life events are what construct the blueprint into your individual persona.

In the world of psychology, there has been a long and ongoing debate about Nature versus Nurture. In this sense, nature represents the influence of our genetics and nurture represents the environment in which we develop. Psychologists who take a very hereditary approach believe that the variation in our personalities is completely attributed to our genetic code. These psychologists are known as nativists (simplypsychology.org). However, there are others that believe that beginning at birth an individual has a "blank slate" and over time they

gain their personality through different experiences in their lives. They are known as environmentalists (simplypsychology.com). Taking an environmentalist approach, one would consider that our childhood development plays a dominant role in shaping the people we become: “Psychological characteristics and behavioral differences that emerge through infancy and childhood are the result of learning. It is how you are brought up that governs the psychologically significant aspects of child development, and the concept of maturation applies only to the biological” (simplypsychology.org).

Psychologists define environment by the conditions surrounding an individual. Some environmentalists believe that the environment you are placed in has a greater effect on your personality than your genetic makeup: “All of the results strongly suggest that our environment plays as big—if not bigger— a role as heredity in shaping personality and intelligence” (Wiseman 87). Although genetics have a role in creating a mold of our potential personality, it is our environment that gives us the tools to fill the mold: “Genetic differences in temperament are only predispositions to behave in certain ways, however, environmental conditions may point different children with the same predisposition in somewhat different directions” (education.com). Assuming this is true, if you took two children with similar genetic predispositions and placed one in a affluent home and the other in an impoverished home, they would likely grow up to be very different people.

Karl Alexander, a sociologist at John Hopkins University took this exact approach. He tracked around 800 kids in Baltimore from first grade until their late twenty's, measuring their success in life. The results were not surprising. The article states, “They found that a child's fate is in many ways fixed at birth — determined by family strength and the parents' financial status”

(npr.org). Children that grew up in a financially stable home with two parents were likely to become more successful later on in life. Those that were less fortunate and grew up in a barren home didn't have much of a lifestyle change as they grew into adults. Professor Alexander met with one of his study subjects, Monica Jaundoo. Monica Jaundoo's childhood was filled with worrying about money and trying to ignore the negative influences surrounding her: "I remember being so immune to death, so immune to shootings, killings. I just remember wanting them to rush, like, get the body out the way so we can get back to playing hopscotch or dodgeball" (npr.org). Although Monica did not make it far out of Baltimore, she realized that in order for her kids to have a better chance at a good life she would need to make some changes. She now has a steady job and plans to marry her current boyfriend. These two factors have allowed her children to grow up in a stable and supportive home: "My mom tells me about the stories of how she used to live in her childhood, and I like this better," says 8-year-old Makai. "Because, like, she gives me support on stuff, and I enjoy ... how it is" (npr.org). What is so amazing about Ms. Jaundoo is how she was able to keep her head on straight even though she was in a toxic environment when growing up.

So far we have analyzed the genetic and environmental aspects that impact who you become, but there is a third piece of this puzzle that Monica's story touches on. How do you become a successful person when your genetic predispositions and your environment have failed you? I believe that there is a strong third influence on who you become: your moral compass. All humans have the ability to make choices that heavily impact their lives. In Monica's case, she chose to work hard and not let the factors she couldn't control decide who she was going to be. Throughout history, there have been many people that have risen from unthinkable situations

into positions of power due to their tenacity and strong will. This theory provides hope for those who are not lucky enough to be blessed with strong genetics or an affluent home, but it also raises a perplexing question: What inner force controls our moral compass?

Psychologist, Sigmund Freud hypothesized that the human psyche is constructed of three main parts which develop throughout your childhood and well into your adolescence. These three parts are referred to as your id, ego, and superego and they are different processes which allow humans to make decisions. When you are a child, you develop your id which makes decisions based on instinct and with little concern about the repercussions of your actions. As psychologist Saul Mcleod says, “The id is not affected by reality, logic, or the everyday world” (simplypsychology.com). The id craves immediate satisfaction and if fulfilled an individual will feel a sensation of pleasure. However, if the id remains unsatisfied, the individual will feel pain. This effect occurs because the id operates on the pleasure principle—the concept that every lustful impulse should be appeased immediately, regardless of the consequences (simplypsychology.com). As you grow older, you develop a conscience and realize that it is socially incorrect to operate only on your id instincts. This is when you begin to develop your ego, a system which takes into account consequences and weighs out options realistically. Similar to the id, your ego seeks to achieve pleasure and avoid obstacles. However, your ego is aware of social norms and proper etiquette and will craft an attainable scheme in order to satisfy your id cravings. Freud once stated, “The ego is like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse” (Freud 33). The ego does not base decisions off of what is right versus wrong but simply off of whether or not they will be able to reach the id’s end goal without causing harm or facing repercussions. The third process which humans develop well into

their teens is called a superego. The superego can be referred to as an individual's moral compass and makes decisions for the greater good. Psychologist Saul Mcleod states, "The superego's function is to control the id's impulses, especially those which society forbids, such as sex and aggression. It also has the function of persuading the ego to turn to moralistic goals rather than simply realistic ones and to strive for perfection" (simplypsychology.com).

Interestingly enough, one can possess a strong superego and still commit a crime: "In many criminals, especially youthful ones, it is possible to detect a very powerful sense of guilt which existed before the crime, and is therefore not its result but its motive. It is as if it was a relief to be able to fasten this unconscious sense of guilt on to something real and immediate" (p.54 Freud, Sigmund). It is possible that humans contain such a strong sense of moral correctness that they feel they should be punished for having natural impulses that are frowned upon by society such as sex and aggression. In order to purify themselves, people execute crimes to be caught and punished, thus relieving themselves of their guilt. However, this is a very extreme case. Yet, it does show that humans have great strength within them and if they can harness this power, they can pull themselves through life's hardships. In the case of Monica Jaundoo, her superego was so dominant and focused on giving her children a better life that she was able to push through unfortunate circumstances and eventually succeed. Thus, even if you are placed in a situation where the numbers are stacked against you, you can prevail if your morality is powerful enough.

So far we have examined the effects of genetics, environment, and morality on an individual's personality. However, in ancient India, there is another theory that works to explain one's personality. This concept is known as Ayurveda and is directly translated as "the science of

life” (Lad, Vasant). Ayurveda is the idea that all human beings carry three distinctive energy’s referred to in Sanskrit as vata, pitta, and kapha. Vata represents body, pitta translates to mind, and kapha means consciousness. It is believed that the combination and balance of these three energies creates a unique personality: “Just as everyone has a unique fingerprint, each person has a particular pattern of energy- and individual combination of physical, mental, and emotional characteristics - which compromises their own constitution. This constitution is determined at conception by a number of factors and remains the same throughout one’s life” (Lad, Vasant). However, if this balance is altered, it can lead to distinctive changes in one’s personality. The energy of vata controls breathing, movement, and pulsation of the heart. When in balance, vata promotes creativity and flexibility, but out of balance it produces fear and anxiety. Pitta governs the body’s metabolic and digestive systems. In balance, pitta enhances understanding and intelligence. Out of balance, pitta rouses anger, lust, and hatred. Lastly, kapha maintains immunity and provides the body with a skeletal structure. When in alignment, kapha serves as love, peace, and forgiveness. Out of alignment, it represents greed, attachment, and envy. These three energies are thought to be constantly manipulating one’s personality. This theory allows us to infer that humans are porous creatures that are always taking in new energies and thus continuously changing their ideas and personas.

Throughout my research I have come across a multitude of theories that work to explain how people gain their distinctive personalities. The only concise conclusion I have come to is that there are numerous factors working together to produce your unique personality. Your genetic makeup produces a framework for your personality, giving you a set of specific genes, the various genes combine to influence different personality traits. Although you are born with a certain set of genes, your traits do not fully flourish until your genetic predispositions mix with

your environmental factors. The people that surround you greatly impact your beliefs and influence your ideas, shaping your personality and leading your predispositions down a certain path. However, once you mature, you are given the opportunity to make your own decisions based off of your moral compass. Therefore, even if you are placed in a negative environment and do not have many genetic advantages, you still have a chance to succeed through your own will and moral beliefs. Although some people are born into advantageous situations and others are not, it is still possible for anyone to become who they wish to be. Individuals themselves have the greatest influence on their personality and therefore do have control over who they become.

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