PERSONAL INTELLIGENCE

THE POWER OF PERSONALITY AND HOW IT SHAPES OUR LIVES

JOHN D. MAYER

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To those c
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to all of us

In 1995, Daniel Goleman, then a journalist at *The New York Times*, featured our theory in his lively book also entitled *Emotional Intelligence*. His account created a great deal of interest in our work. Since 1990, Peter and I have worked productively on emotional intelligence, joined later by our colleague David R. Caruso. As a personality psychologist, however, I hoped, ultimately, to develop a theory that would more centrally capture how we understand individuals as a whole—to examine a person's *overall* character, as Crane had put it—and to describe the impact that witnessing character had on each of us. It might seem like a small step from an emotional intelligence to one that concerned personality, but there were several obstacles to making the intellectual journey.

First among the obstacles to creating a theory of personal intelligence was the widespread belief among academic psychologists at the time that personality didn't matter. If personality was irrelevant to an individual's life, then no theory of personal intelligence would be necessary. And, in the 1980s and 1990s, many psychologists subscribed to the idea that personality was an illusion—a will-o'-the-wisp that came and went without any consequences for an individual's life. These psychologists argued that healthy people are so adaptable and responsive to the environment that their behavior is due far more to the situation in which they find themselves than to any inner qualities. Psychologists fought out whether the person or the situation was more important in what became known as the "person-situation" debate of the latter part of the twentieth century—and it still casts a shadow on the field today.

The issues surrounding the person-situation debate can be illustrated with the real-life example of two college baseball players at Arizona State University who were hoping to play professionally: Jeff Larish and Dustin Pedroia. The day before the 2004 draft, scouts from major-league teams were invited to watch the college players at ASU. Larish was a highly ranked player expected to dominate the scouts' attention, but he had a wrist injury and his hitting suffered as a result. Pedroia ended up playing one of the best games of his life up to that time—he later remarked that he was especially

relaxed because he believed all eyes were on Larish. When the Red Sox called the Arizona State coach, it was for Pedroia, and Larish had to wait another year before he got called up by the Detroit Tigers.

Psychologists taking a situational perspective would argue that the situation determined who played the best: the expectations of Larish were too high, especially coupled with his wrist injury; Pedroia could be relaxed and play well because no one expected him to be a focus of attention. Psychologists taking a "person" approach would say that Pedroia's performance was due to his personality, including his motivations and attitudes, his athletic skills, and his mental preparation.

The situationist perspective had found its first advocates years before, in the 1920s, among three forward-looking professors, Hugh Hartshorne and Mark May at Yale, and Edward Thorndike of Columbia. They founded a project called the Character Education Inquiry to explore whether schools could mold personality to make students more "persevering," "honest," and "good"—qualities that leaders in public education wanted to instill in their young charges.

The Inquiry project was massive in scope. Working from 1925 to 1930, the researchers developed their procedures and administered more than 170,000 tests to 10,500 public and private school students to better understand those young people's personality and behavior. For example, to assess honesty, the researchers set up multiple situations in which the schoolchildren could cheat. In one situation, the "duplicating technique," students took a quiz and then turned it in to their teachers. Unbeknownst to the students, the researchers recorded their original answers to the quiz overnight. The next day the teachers passed the quizzes back and asked their students to self-grade their responses—which allowed the children an opportunity to covertly change their original answers. The researchers then checked the students' self-graded results against their original responses to see who had changed their answers. Using approaches like this, the investigators recorded the honesty of a given pupil in each of several situations. To their surprise, they found far

less consistency in honesty across situations than they had expected; their findings helped set off the person-situation controversy.

It's worth taking a close look at what they found. The relationship between any two variables—such as honesty measured in one situation and then in a second situation—is often measured with a statistic known as a correlation coefficient. A zero correlation indicates no relationship between two variables; a correlation of 1.0 indicates a perfect relation. For example, if students in class were given a course grade that was entirely based on their performance on a single test, then the test grades and course grades would be perfectly correlated. Returning to the Character Education Inquiry, if the relation between honesty in the quiz situation and honesty in a second situation (such as peeking when you should keep your eyes closed) were random, the correlation would be zero. If honest behavior in the quiz situation perfectly predicted honesty in the peeking situation, the correlation would be 1.0. Given the zero-to-one scale for a positive relationship, psychologists of the time had likely expected a high correlation between students' honest behaviors across situations—perhaps a .70 or .80 along that zero-to-one continuum.

The researchers at the Character Education Inquiry found, however, that the correlation for honesty across two situations was closer to about .30. And they concluded on that basis that students changed their behaviors so much from one classroom setting to another that the stability of personality appeared negligible. The project leaders expressed their conclusions in extreme terms: they could find "no evidence" for honesty, and no evidence for character more generally.

At first the findings had little impact on the field of personality. Perhaps psychologists found the idea implausible; or scholars may have been distracted by major events going on at the time—the stock market crashes from 1929 to the early 1930s, the Great Depression that followed, World War II. During the war years, many psychologists left academe to work for the military effort. In the postwar period, however, psychologists continued to teach the theories of Freud and Jung, and the new theories of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, which made no contact with the research of the

Character Education Inquiry. The issue of whether personality was consistent was simply not dealt with.

But that all changed when Walter Mischel, then a professor at Stanford, published his book *Personality and Assessment* in 1968. Mischel drove home the situationist perspective by arguing that people adjust how they act in different situations, and their adaptability places severe limits on any predictions we can make from an individual's traits. For example, whether you're a noisy person or a man of few words, you will nonetheless become quiet in a library, and even the rowdiest party animal can be found standing obediently in line in a crowded supermarket. Although we might perceive others we know as consistent, Mischel argued, our perception is an *illusion*: we classify those around us by using "prototypes" of people much as we may stereotype different national or ethnic groups. Once we have pegged someone as a particular "type," we continue to see him through that lens: if we believe someone is "emotional and dramatic," we will fit whatever he does into an "emotional" template, forgetting the many times he has behaved in a perfectly calm fashion.

Many social psychologists and cultural anthropologists loved Mischel's position because it celebrated the power of social influences and discounted the role of personality in behavior. The situationist idea became so pervasive in the 1970s that still today, when I travel on a speaking engagement here or overseas, many human resource professionals and psychologists trained during that time are surprised that I bring up personality at all in my lectures. Hadn't they learned it was elusive?

But, of course, the situation regarding situations was more complex than those who sought to dismiss personality had supposed. In independent articles published in the seventies and eighties, prominent psychologists including Kenneth Bowers, Seymour Epstein, David Funder, and Daniel Ozer pointed out a rather embarrassing problem for the situationists. They concluded, after reviewing a number of studies, that situations, far from being all-powerful, appeared to predict people's behavior at about the same level as personality had. In other words, people weren't easy to predict no matter *how* you tried: we seem to modify our behaviors

to meet both our inner needs and the requirements of the situations we find ourselves in. Psychologists began to wonder about still another possibility: if the correlation from personality traits to a person's acts was so low—and if predicting from situations was no better—was there something about the way we were interpreting the correlation that was problematic?

Robert Abelson, a Yale psychologist, had been arguing the situationist position with a colleague by pointing out that an athlete's performance was often due to "freaky and unpredictable events such as windblown fly balls, runners slipping in patches of mud, baseballs bouncing oddly off outfield walls . . ." His colleague argued for the power of personality, contending that regardless of circumstances it was an obvious fact that "good teams usually win, [and] that even under freaky circumstances . . . skilled players will better overcome difficulties than mediocre players . . ."

To clarify the situation, Abelson studied the batting averages of baseball players—the number of hits a player gets per time at bat. Major-league players averaged about .270 overall in 1986, with individual players averaging hits from the .200s to the .300s for the most part—a considerable range. For example, a player with a .320 batting average compared with a player with a .220 average had nearly a *50 percent greater likelihood* of getting a hit during a single time at bat. So Abelson was quite surprised to find that, when he correlated batting averages with the likelihood of a player's hitting the ball at a single at-bat, the correlation was just .11. Surely, batting averages described the skill of the batter, yet batting averages were a poor predictor of a single at-bat performance.

Abelson pointed out that the apparently low correlation between a person's skill level and his behavior in an individual situation masked the important consistencies a person expresses as his behaviors accumulate *over time*—and these consistencies matter when we try to estimate the behavior of a friend, a supervisor, or a spouse. For example, if you had two friends who had "batting averages" of being late of .220 and .320, and you met them a few dozen times over the course of a year, the friend with the .320 average would be late nearly 50 percent more often—a considerable incon-

venience to you, *unless you recognized it* and accommodated to it. So, you could arrange to meet him in places that were comfortable to wait, and bring something to do until he arrived.

More generally, a person who behaved like a "random decider" would pick the more suitable of two possible individuals for a friendship or for a job 50 percent of the time (by chance alone); but someone who was just a bit perceptive might choose the person who is a better fit for the relationship, say, 53 percent of the time, and the less good one 47 percent of the time. And it seems entirely possible that still more perceptive individuals might choose the more suitable member of the pair 65 percent of the time versus 35 percent.* Even people who choose just a bit better than chance are likely to benefit from substantial advantages in their relationships because they will make those better choices time and again, situation after situation, over a lifetime.

Some people can pick up clues to personality that others miss. For example, as the Red Sox scouts considered recruiting Dustin Pedroia, they likely gathered whatever information about him they could. The clues they sought would have included his performance over time as reflected in his batting average and other statistics—and also some of his attitudes about playing baseball generally. According to family lore, Pedroia's parents gave him a bat and allowed him to swing at anything just after he learned to walk. By the time he was a young child, friends of his parents who watched him hit would admire his ability. Most parents find themselves reminding their children not to play with baseball bats or throw things in the house. But life for Pedroia was different. In his words, he would practice throwing and catching baseballs inside: "[I'd] fire the ball off the bricks [of the fireplace], catch it, then turn and fire it at my mom, who was sitting on the couch. She's such a good athlete, she was

*There aren't any well-worked-out estimates I could find that specifically addressed how accurate we are at selecting the better of two people for a given task or relationship. The basis for my suggestion that the rates could reach as high as 65 percent versus 35 percent is explained in the Notes section.

Epstein, S., & O'Brien, E. J. (1985). The person-situation debate in historical and current perspective. *Psychological Bulletin, 98,* 513–537.

16 *"freaky and unpredictable events"* and *"good teams usually win"* . . . From p. 129 of Abelson, R. P. (1985). A variance explanation paradox: When a little is a lot. *Psychological Bulletin, 97,* 129–133.

17 *And it seems entirely possible that still more perceptive individuals might choose the more suitable member of the pair 65 percent of the time versus 35 percent* . . . To the best of my knowledge, there are no research findings that directly address how well people might perform in making the "better choice" of a person from a pair of people, so these figures represent an educated guess. The 65 versus 35 percent split I advanced in the text represents a conversion of the correlation of .30 between an observer's choice and a desired outcome, as I'll explain toward the end of this note.

I chose the .30 correlation because correlations between .30 and .40 represent a relationship often found between traits (as measured by tests) and behaviors. A correlation of about .30 (.33, specifically) also describes the approximate level at which interviewers, using their own preferred styles of questioning, are able to predict a job candidate's success. It seems plausible to me that the same approximately .30 correlation might describe the "making better choices" example I have laid out, for which a chooser must compare the differences between the two people and from those differences (which likely are multivariate normal) estimate which candidate is the better choice. My estimate is necessarily approximate, and I invite others who are interested in this problem to improve on this initial treatment.

The relevant references for the .30-to-.40 correlations between traits and behavior are reviewed in Chapter 4, see especially pp. 114–115 of Funder, D. R. (2013). *The personality puzzle (6th ed.).* W. W. Norton. The .33 correlation between unstructured interviews and job performance (one of several results) is reported in McDaniel, M. A., Whetzel, D. L., Schmidt, F. L., & Maurer, S. D. (1994). The validity of employment interviews: A comprehensive review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 79,* 599–616.

To convert a correlation of .30 to decision-making outcomes expressed as percents, I used a Binomial Effect Size Display (BESD). Based on the correlation of .30, I used calculations of $.30/2 \times 100 = 15$, or 50 +/–15, that is, of 65 and 35, for the relevant cells of the table. The method is outlined in Rosenthal, R., & Rubin, D. B. (1982). A simple, general purpose display of magnitude of experimental effect. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 74,* 166–169. In essence, I formed a 2 (cue to pair member's personality indicates selecting) × 2 (choice of pair member actually leads to a better outcome) table as shown on the facing page and read across the "better outcome" column, ignoring the rest, to get the 65–35 percent success rate.

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		Worse outcome	Better outcome	Total overall
Cue to pair member's personality indicates selecting the individual is a:	Better choice	35	65	100
	Worse choice	65	35	100
Total Overall		100	100	200

17 *By the time he was a young child* . . . According to family lore, friends of the Pedroia family remarked, "Wow, your son's really good," from p. 10 of Pedroia, D., with Delaney, E. J. (2008). *Born to play: My life in the game.* New York: Simon Spotlight Entertainment.

17–18 *"fire the ball off the bricks"* and *"Don't worry about the clock"* . . . Ibid., p. 24.

18 *"the only tool I saw he had was"* and *"I can't think the Red Sox are this smart"* . . . Ibid., pp. 4–5.

18 *Walter Mischel—who had pointed out people's inconsistencies* . . . Mischel noted that "correlations across situations tend to be highest for cognitive and intellectual functions . . . Considerable stability over time has been demonstrated for some domains, and again particularly for ability and cognitive measures," on p. 36 of Mischel, W. (1968). *Personality and assessment.* New York: John Wiley and Sons.

19 *The term itself had been used on an occasional basis* . . . Earlier uses of the term "personal intelligence" included magazine columns or features on prominent individuals. See, for example, Anonymous. (1851, February 27). General Jackson and the clerk. *New Hampshire Patriot & State Gazette*, p. 4, and Guernsey, A. H. (1857, July). Editor's table. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine.* The use of personal intelligence as a reflection of aspects of an individual's traditional IQ was used by Thorne, S. (1990). *The theory of intelligence: A sensory-rational view.* Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

19 *Howard Gardner had proposed an intrapersonal intelligence* . . . Gardner describes intrapersonal intelligence as a blend of emotional discernment and identity; he emphasizes emotion-related abilities on p. 239, and refers to identity multiple times throughout the chapter. His interpersonal intelligence was focused on recognizing individual differences on p. 239, and broadened into