THEORIES OF PERSONALITY IN SPORT

One of the big debates in Psychology is between Situational and Dispositional explanations of human behaviour. The SITUATIONAL HYPOTHESIS argues that people are all basically the same but they find themselves in different situations; if you want to explain why one person persevered and another person gave up, you need to look at their circumstances, background and relationships. The DISPOSITIONAL view is that people have certain unique qualities that remain constant across different situations and over time; personality could be one of these things.

Psychologists studying personality have identified TRAITS, which are personal qualities that all humans share to some extent or other but which people have in different combinations. Research has agreed upon five traits (the "Big 5") that everyone shares to some extent or other; this was first proposed by L.L. Thurstone in 1933:

- **Openness to Experience**: how adventurous, artistic and tolerant are you?
- **Conscientiousness**: how self-controlled and disciplined are you?
- **Extraversion**: how outgoing and thrill-seeking are you?
- **Agreeableness**: how compassionate and cooperative are you?
- **Neuroticism**: how emotionally changeable are you?

This is called the Five Factor Model (FFM) but you can remember it with the mnemonic O.C.E.A.N.

Many psychologists like to take situations into account too, especially in sport where competitions can put athletes in incredible intense situations. This is the TRAIT-STATE approach, which recognises that people have certain constant traits, but most of the time we are influenced by temporary personality states. Because sporting situations involve extremes of tension, frustration, boredom and dependency, temporary states can often overwhelm permanent traits. This explains why a normally calm player can burst into tears, whoops for joy or throw his racket at the umpire!

**Personality Factors (Cattell, 1946)**

Raymond Cattell was one of the first trait theorists. He took 18,000 personality words from the Oxford English Dictionary and narrowed them down to 181 by focusing on words that were clearly different from each other in meaning. Participants were asked to use these words to rate themselves and other people they knew. Cattell then used a ground-breaking mathematical technique called factor analysis and new computer technology to see which groups of descriptions naturally occurred together. This produced a final set of 16 Personality Factors (called primary factors as opposed to the Big 5's global factors):

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Warmth</th>
<th>Liveliness</th>
<th>Vigilance</th>
<th>Openness to Change</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasoning</td>
<td>Rule Consciousness</td>
<td>Abstdectedness</td>
<td>Self Reliance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional Stability</td>
<td>Social Boldness</td>
<td>Privateness</td>
<td>Perfectionism</td>
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<td>Dominance</td>
<td>Sensitivity</td>
<td>Apprehension</td>
<td>Tension</td>
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Cattell argues that everybody has **surface** traits like honesty or patience that are quite easy to detect. These tend to cluster together; for example, someone who is quite honest will usually also be dutiful and disciplined. He argues that traits cluster together like this because they all stem from underlying **source** traits that are rather less obvious. In this case, the source trait would be "Perfectionism". Each source trait covers a spectrum from one extreme to another; perfectionism covers a spectrum from self-controlled to undisciplined at the other.

Cattell used his 16 personality factors to design a successful psychometric test for measuring personality: the 16PF.

Cattell's approach has the advantage of being based on the way real people actually describe personality - though it is a bit out of date, based on a dictionary and sample from the 1940s. Terms like "wicked" have changed meaning since then.

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**Extraversion & Neuroticism (Eysenck, 1947; 1975)**

Another researcher, **Hans Eysenck**, was also using factor analysis but thought personality factors could be reduced to something even more straightforward than Cattell's 16. Eysenck proposed there were only **two** essential personality dimensions: Extraversion and Neuroticism. He based his ideas on his study of 700 battle-fatigued soldiers at the Mill Hill Hospital during WWII who had been diagnosed as "neurotic". Eysenck found that his own psychological categories matched the medical diagnoses given to the soldiers.

**Extraversion (E)** is the tendency to enjoy social encounters. Eysenck suggests this is based on a structure in the brain called the **Ascending Reticular Activating System** (ARAS) which controls the amount of stimulation the brain receives. Some people have brains that are under-aroused and need stimulation from outside (company, excitement, attention) and these are the extraverts. Other people have over-aroused brains and get overwhelmed by stimulation and seek privacy instead; these are the introverts.

**Neuroticism (N)** is the tendency to experience negative emotions. Eysenck argues that this too is based on biology, in particular the **Autonomic Nervous System** (ANS) that handles the body's response to stress. Some people are very sensitive to stressors; they are neurotics. Others handle stress without becoming emotional; Eysenck refers to this as being "emotionally stable".

Eysenck's approach is deliberately **REDUCTIONIST**, trying to simplify the study of personality as much as possible. He offers a biological explanation of personality and actually suggested that personality is 75% biological influences and 25% environmental influences. In 1965 Eysenck published the EPI to measure E and N scores.

In the 1970s Eysenck and his wife Sybil added to this theory with a third personality dimension: **Psychoticism (P)**. Psychoticism is based on the body's hormonal system and produces callousness and hostility. It links with the FFM traits of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. With these three dimensions, Eysenck's theory became known as the **P-E-N MODEL** of personality and he published the EPQ to measure P, E and N scores.
Myers-Briggs Typology (Myers & Briggs, 1962)

Katherine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Myers began researching personality during WWII for a project to help women entering the workforce work out which jobs they were suitable for. They adopted the ideas of the famous psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1921, right) that everyone's mind can be divided into:

- **Sense** (experiencing reality) vs **Intuition** (imaginative)
- **Thinking** (logical ideas) vs **Feeling** (individuals and values)

Myers & Briggs came up with 8 psychological types, made of opposed pairs, that can combine together in unique combinations and argued that everyone has preferences for some ways of reacting to the world over others, rather like being left or right handed. The types are:

- Extraverted, Sensing, Thinking, Judging
- Introverted, Intuition, Feeling, Perceiving

A crucial difference between Myers-Briggs and the previous two theories is that Myers-Briggs is a theory about personality TYPES not personality traits. You have either a preference for Thinking or for Feeling - you can't have a bit of both. Everyone will have a **dominant** type that reflects their habitual, reflexive way of viewing the world. **Competitive** personalities are dominant in Intuition, with Thinking (NT) as auxiliary. **Humanistic** personalities (Intuitive/Feeling or NF) tend to be great team players. **Methodical** personalities (Sensing/Judging or SJ) like to compete for the satisfaction of a job well done: winning is its own reward for them.

This view of personality is strongly cognitive, based entirely on how people perceive the world and interpret the things that happen to them, and owes nothing to biology. Neither Katherine Briggs nor Isabel Briggs Myers (left) were trained psychologists and their model has not been validated by experiments. Nevertheless, the MBTI is a very popular personality test.

Think about this. The Myers-Briggs Typology was created by women, for women; in many ways it's a more **gynocentric** (female orientated) approach than Cattell or Eysenck. It doesn't put personal qualities into any sort of hierarchy, with some being "better" than others. It doesn't give respondents number scores, with some people being "more" extraverted than others. People can and do use their MBTI type for personal growth and reflection. It's all quite... groovy.

Psychodynamic Theory (Freud, 1920)

A completely different view of personality comes from the work of Sigmund Freud, particularly *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Freud argues that the personality is a much more mysterious thing than a set of traits and that people don't really understand their own personalities at all, making psychometric tests like the 16PF, EPI or MBTI worthless.
The basis of personality is the Id, which is the irrational source of all our desires. The Id's needs are entirely related to pleasure and for the Id, pleasure is sexual. Even eating or going to the toilet are sexual thrills for the Id. The Id has no idea about the outside world, cannot plan or communicate. It's like a giant, needy baby.

The Ego develops later than the Id when toddlers learn to explore the world. The Ego understands reality, can plan and communicate. It has no desires of its own but it works to gratify the desires of the Id. Sometimes that means deferring (putting off) some of the Id's desires till later. The Ego has no sense of right and wrong, but it does understand punishment and tries to avoid it.

The Super-ego emerges when the child goes through a period of conflict with its parents around age 5 (the Oedipus Complex). The Super-ego is the voice of conscience and gets its way by inflicting anxiety on the Ego - the pangs of guilt and shame. This can put the Ego in an intolerable position, receiving incessant demands from the Id and being made to feel shame and guilt by the Super-ego. The Ego responds by creating DEFENCE MECHANISMS to block out the Id's desires or silence the Super-ego's complaints.

Freud's view, like Myers & Briggs', has very little experimental support and seems to some people to be fanciful and imaginative rather than scientific and realistic. His idea of defence mechanisms does seem to apply to sport, though. For example, two common defence mechanisms are:

- **Displacement** keeps the Super-ego quiet by turning the Id's desires towards a different target. Say your Id wants to pound your father in the face, but instead you go to the squash courts and pound a rubber ball about for half an hour. You feel much better.
- **Sublimation** tickles the Super-ego by turning the Id's desires into something completely different. If your Id wants sex, you can turn this into the concentration, grace and poise needed for figure skating. Freud explains the psychology behind most art in this way.

Freud's theories have another application to sport: the "dread of success". This is the idea that, on an unconscious level, some performers do not actually want to succeed and actually sabotage their own efforts without realising it. The might do this because of deep feelings of worthlessness coming from the Super-ego; by winning, they would be asserting their superiority and the Super-ego will not allow this, so by having "accidents" and losing concentration they can keep their Ego safe. This is another sort of defense mechanism. Read this article on Olympic speed skater Dan Jansen for a possible example of the dread of success.

Several projective personality tests are based on Freud's theories, such as the Rorschach Inkblot Test.