Chapter 1
The Study of the Person

What is personality psychology about?

• Personality psychology addresses all 3 parts of the psychological triad in combination:
  1. How people think
  2. How people feel
  3. How people behave
• Each of these phenomena is important on its own, but they are even more interesting in combination, especially when they conflict.
  – I.e. have you ever experienced a conflict between how you feel and what you think, such as an attraction towards someone you knew was not good for you?
  – I.e. have you ever had a conflict between what you think and what you do, such as intending to do your homework and then going to the beach instead?
• Inconsistencies between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are common enough to make us suspect that the mind is not a simple place, and even that understanding oneself—the person we know above all others—is not necessarily easy.

All persons are puzzles until at last we find in some word or act the key to the man, to the woman; straightaway all their past words and actions lie in light before us.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

What is personality psychology about?

• Most people think of psychologists as clinical psychologists who do clinical work treating individuals with mental health challenges.
• Personality psychology is not the same as clinical psychology, but the 2 fields do overlap.
• Many personality psychologists have had clinical training.
• Both clinical and personality psychologists share a common fundamental obligation to try to understand the whole person, not just parts of the person, one individual at a time.
• Clinical psychology is the largest subfield of psychology.
• Personality psychology is where the rest of psychology comes together. It draws heavily from social, cognitive, developmental, and biological psychology, but also contributes to these fields by showing how...
The goal of personality psychology

- Text definition of personality:
  - An individual’s characteristic patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, together with psychological mechanisms—hidden or not—behind those patterns.
- This definition gives personality psychology its unique mission to explain whole persons—putting functioning individuals in their social contexts.
- The challenge is that this is an impossible mission.

Mission: impossible

- The mission of explaining whole persons is personality psychology’s biggest difficulty.
- If you try to understand everything about a person all at once, you will be overwhelmed.
- Instead of attaining a broad understanding, your mind may go blank.
- What is ironic is that the way out is to limit what you look at.
- Rather than trying to account for everything all at once, you must search for more specific patterns—ways of tying together different kinds of observations.
  - Limiting yourself to certain kinds of observations, patterns, and ways of thinking about these patterns.
- A systematic, self-imposed limitation like this is what is considered a basic approach (or paradigm).

Overview of approaches

- Trait approach
  - Focus on the ways that people differ psychologically from each other and how these differences might be conceptualized and measured.
- Biological approach
  - Try to understand the mind in terms of the body by addressing basic biological mechanisms, such as anatomy, physiology, inheritance, and even evolution, and their relevance for personality.
- Psychoanalytic approach
  - Concerned with the workings of the unconscious mind, and the nature and resolution of internal mental conflict.
- Phenomenological approach
  - Focus on people's conscious experience of the world, their “phenomenology” in one of two directions:
    1. “Humanistic” psychology pursues how conscious awareness can produce such uniquely human attributes as existential anxiety, creativity, and free will.
    2. “Cross-cultural” psychology emphasizes the degree to which psychology and the very experience of reality might vary across cultures.
- Learning and cognitive approach
  - Concentrate on the ways in which people change what they do as a result of the rewards, punishments, and other experiences in life—learning.

Competitors or complements?

- The various approaches to personality are often portrayed as competing with each other. The original, famous protagonists of each approach made their mark by announcing to the world that their approach was the one that finally accounted for everything anybody would ever want to know about human nature and that other approaches are worthless.
- Obviously, this isn’t true.
- It’s not helpful to regard these basic approaches as forever locked in mutually exclusive competition. They complement rather than compete with each other because each addresses a different set of questions about human psychology.
  - I.e. an employer trying to decide who to hire must compare different individuals. This problem is addressed by trait assessment.
  - I.e. a parent who worries about aspects of a teen’s behavior and how the parent’s actions might make a difference probably needs a behavioral approach.
Distinct approaches vs. the One Big Theory (OBT)

- You might be wondering why someone doesn’t just come up with One Big Theory (OBT) that explains everything rather than all of these different approaches?
- Consider a valued principle of engineering:
  - A device that does one thing well is likely to be relatively poor at doing anything else. A toaster is terrible for making coffee. The reverse is true as well in that a device that does many things will probably not do any of them well. A combo toaster, coffeemaker, and clock radio will likely not be as good at all 3 of these functions as an appliance that serves only 1 of these functions.
- A theory that accounts for certain things very well will likely not do so well at explaining everything else. And a theory that tried to explain almost everything—the OBT—would probably not provide the best explanation for any 1 thing.
- Personality psychology needs to look at people from all of these directions and utilize all of these approaches because different issues are best viewed from different perspectives. For this reason, we will focus on them one at a time to fully understand each of them separately.

Advantages and disadvantages

- One of the major themes of this text is Funder’s First Law:
  - In life and in psychology, advantages and disadvantages have a way of being so tightly interconnected as to be inseparable. Great strengths are usually great weaknesses, and surprisingly often the opposite is true as well.
  - Personality psychology is an excellent example of this law.
    - Personality psychology’s biggest advantage over other areas of psychology is that it has a broad mandate to account for the psychology of whole persons and to be relevant to real-life concerns.
    - This mandate makes the study of personality more inclusive, interesting, important, and even more fun than it would be otherwise. This is also the biggest problem. In the wrong hands, it can lead research to be overinclusive, unfocused, or overexclusive.

- Each approach being good at addressing some topics and poor on others is similar to the connection between strengths and weaknesses within individuals.
- Take a minute and think about your strongest point. How is it a problem to you? Now think about your weakest point. What are its benefits for you? Given these trade-offs, would you really like to lose all of your weaknesses and keep all of your strengths? Given the way that your strengths and weaknesses are connected, is this even possible?
- For personality psychology, if the scope were narrowed, the field would be more manageable and research easier to do. But then the field would lose much of what makes it distinctive, important, and interesting. Similarly, each approach to personality has made a decision to ignore some aspects of human psychology. This is a heavy cost, but is necessary for each approach to make progress in its own area.

Pigeonholing vs. appreciation of individual differences

- Personality psychology tends to emphasize how individuals are different from one another. This can be viewed as a tendency to categorize or “pigeonhole” human beings.
- Other subfields of psychology (i.e. cognitive and social), tend to ignore differences between people, but also the statistical analyses that are central to their experimental research literally put individual differences into their “error” terms.
- Although the emphasis of personality psychology often entails categorizing and labeling people, it also leads the field to be extraordinarily sensitive—more sensitive than any other area of psychology—to the fact that people really are different from each other.
- This fact of individual differences is the starting place for all of personality psychology and gives the field a distinctive and humanistic mission of appreciating the uniqueness of each individual. People are different, and it’s necessary and natural to wonder how and why.