**Personality Development**

An individual's personality is the complex of mental characteristics that makes them unique from other people. It includes all of the patterns of thought and emotions that cause us to do and say things in particular ways. At a basic level, personality is expressed through our temperament or emotional tone. However, personality also colors our values, beliefs, and expectations. There are many potential factors that are involved in shaping a personality. These factors are usually seen as coming from heredity and the environment. Research by psychologists over the last several decades has increasingly pointed to hereditary factors being more important, especially for basic personality traits such as emotional tone. However, the acquisition of values, beliefs, and expectations seem to be due more to socialization and unique experiences, especially during childhood.

Some hereditary factors that contribute to personality development do so as a result of interactions with the particular social environment in which people live. For instance, your genetically inherited physical and mental capabilities have an impact on how others see you and, subsequently, how you see yourself. If you have poor motor skills that prevent you from throwing a ball straight and if you regularly get bad grades in school, you will very likely be labeled by your teachers, friends, and relatives as someone who is inadequate or a failure to some degree. This can become a self-fulfilling prophecy as you increasingly perceive yourself in this way and become more pessimistic about your capabilities and your future. Likewise, your health and physical appearance are likely to be very important in your personality development. You may be frail or robust. You may have a learning disability. You may be slender in a culture that considers obesity attractive or vice versa. These largely hereditary factors are likely to cause you to feel that you are nice-looking, ugly, or just adequate. Likewise, skin color, gender, and sexual orientation are likely to have a major impact on how you perceive yourself. Whether you are accepted by others as being normal or abnormal can lead you to think and act in a socially acceptable or marginal and even deviant way.

There are many potential environmental influences that help to shape personality. Child rearing practices are especially critical. In North America, children are usually raised in ways that encourage them to become self-reliant and independent. Children are often allowed to act somewhat like equals to their parents. For
instance, they are included in making decisions about what type of food and entertainment the family will have on a night out. Children are given allowances and small jobs around the house to teach them how to be responsible for themselves. In contrast, children in China are usually encouraged to think and act as a member of their family and to suppress their own wishes when they are in conflict with the needs of the family. Independence and self-reliance are viewed as an indication of family failure and are discouraged. It is not surprising that Chinese children traditionally have not been allowed to act as equals to their parents.

Despite significant differences in child rearing practices around the world, there are some similarities. Boys and girls are socialized differently to some extent in all societies. They receive different messages from their parents and other adults as to what is appropriate for them to do in life. They are encouraged to prepare for their future in jobs fitting their gender. Boys are more often allowed freedom to experiment and to participate in physically risky activities. Girls are encouraged to learn how to do domestic chores and to participate in child rearing by baby-sitting. If children do not follow these traditional paths, they are often labeled as marginal or even deviant—girls may be called "tomboys" and boys may be ridiculed for being "effeminate."

![risky activities which until the late 20th century were allowed only for males in most societies](image)

There are always unique situations and interpersonal events that help to shape our personalities. Such things as having alcoholic parents, being seriously injured in a car accident, or being raped can leave mental scars that make us fearful and less trusting. If you are an only child, you don't have to learn how to compromise as much as children who have several siblings. Chance meetings and actions may have a major impact on the rest of our lives and affect our personalities. For instance, being accepted for admission to a prestigious university or being in the right place at the right time to meet the person who will become your spouse or life partner can significantly alter the course of the rest of your life. Similarly, being drafted into the military during wartime, learning that you were adopted, or personally witnessing a tragic event, such as the destruction of the World Trade Center towers in New York, can change your basic perspective.

**Are there Personality Types?**

We often share personality traits with others, especially members of our own family and community. This is probably due largely to being socialized in much the same way. It is normal for us to acquire personality traits as a result of enculturation.
Most people adopt the traditions, rules, manners, and biases of their culture. Given this fact, it is not surprising that some researchers have claimed that there are common national personality types, especially in the more culturally homogenous societies. During the 1940's, some leading anthropologists and psychologists argued that there are distinct Japanese and German personalities that led these two nations to view other countries as trying to destroy them.

The concept of national personality types primarily had its origins in anthropology with the research of Ruth Benedict beginning in the 1920's. She believed that personality was almost entirely learned. She said that normal people acquire a distinct ethos, or culturally specific personality pattern, during the process of being enculturated as children. Benedict went on to say that our cultural personality patterns are assumed to be "natural" by us and other personality patterns are viewed as being "unnatural" and deviant. She said that such feelings are characteristic of all people in all cultures because we are ethnocentric. Benedict compared the typical personalities of the 19th century North American Plains Indians with those of the farming Pueblo Indians of the American Southwest. She said that the bison hunting Plains Indians had personalities that could be typified as being aggressive, prone to violence, and seeking extreme emotional states. In contrast, she said that the typical Pueblo Indian was just the opposite—peaceful, non-aggressive, and sober in personality.

Benedict's views were especially popular in the 1930's among early feminists such as her student Margaret Mead. This was because if personality is entirely learned, it means that feminine and masculine personality traits are not biologically hard-wired in. In other words, culture rather than genes, makes women nurturing towards children and passive in response to men. Likewise, culture makes men aggressive and domineering. If this is true, these stereotypical behaviors can be altered and even reversed. Mead carried out ethnographic field work among the Polynesian and Melanesian peoples of the South Pacific to find examples of societies in which femininity and masculinity have very different and even opposite characteristics from those found in the Western World. She also found in Samoa a relaxed adolescence in which sex is talked about freely by boys and girls rather than hidden or suppressed.
NOTE: In the 1980's, J. D. Freeman argued that Margaret Mead was wrong in her assertion about a relaxed Samoan adolescence in regards to sexuality. He described Samoan society as being comparatively puritanical as a result of Christian missionary influences. Other researchers have countered by saying that Freeman did most of his fieldwork a generation after Mead and that Samoan society may have changed in that time.

Most anthropologists today believe that Benedict and her students went too far in their assertions about the influence of culture on personality formation and in discounting heredity. They also tended to over simplify by defining people who did not share all of the traits of the "national personality type" as being deviants. It is more accurate to see the members of a society as having a range of personality types. What Benedict was describing was actually the modal personality. This is the most common personality type within a society. In reality, there is usually a range of normal personality types within each society.

In the early 1950's, David Riesman proposed that there are three common types of modal personality that occur around the world. He called them tradition oriented, inner-directed, and other directed personalities. The tradition-oriented personality is one that places a strong emphasis on doing things the same way that they have always been done. Individuals with this sort of personality are less likely to try new things and to seek new experiences. Those who have inner-directed personalities are guilt oriented. That is to say, their behavior is strongly controlled by their conscience. As a result, there is little need for police to make sure that they obey the law. These individuals monitor themselves. If they break the law, they are likely to turn themselves in for punishment. In contrast, people with other-directed personalities have ambiguous feelings about right and wrong. When they deviate from a societal norm, they usually don't feel guilty. However, if they are caught in the act or exposed publicly, they are likely to feel shame.

Advocates of Riesman's concept of three modal personalities suggest that the tradition-oriented personality is most common in small-scale societies and in some sub-cultures of large-scale ones. Inner-directed personalities are said to be more common in some large-scale societies, especially ones that are culturally homogenous. In contrast, the other-directed personality is likely to be found in culturally diverse large-scale societies in which there is not a uniformity in socialization processes and there is considerable anonymity for city dwellers.

While Riesman's analysis of personalities was insightful, critics have pointed out that individuals may have characteristics of all three of his identified modal types. For instance, most North Americans probably do not feel guilty about exceeding speed limits when they are driving on freeways, however, they would feel very guilty hitting someone with their car and would likely call the police. In other words, for some infractions of the law they are other-directed (or shame-controlled), and for others they are inner-directed (or guilt-controlled). Likewise, many people like to do some things in the same way every day but seek new experiences in other areas of their lives. You may like to wear the same style of clothes and spend your
leisure time at the same place with your friends most days. However, you may easily get bored eating the same kinds of food every day and regularly try new restaurants when you go out to eat. In other words, you are tradition-oriented for some things but not others.