

**The Variable State of Your Personality:
*Don't be fooled by a typology label***

*Global traits... are excessively crude, gross units
to encompass adequately the extraordinary complexity and
subtlety of the discriminations that people constantly make.*

-Walter Mischel (1968)

Last May, I was inspired by a keynote talk given by Dr. Walter Mischel, the originator of “The Marshmallow Test” of emotional intelligence (see my *ISHN* contribution in October 1996). He reminded me of his seminal personality-based research and theory development. Indeed, his research and scholarship in the domain of dispositional determinants of behavior caused substantial turmoil and controversy among personality psychologists.

The opening quotation defines the personality paradox, which fueled a prolonged person-versus-situation debate among personality scholars. Since the early 1900's, personality researchers have attempted to classify people into stable, cross-situational typologies, based on people's physical characteristics or their reactions to words, pictures, or survey questions. Today, most psychologists realize the same individual shows substantial dispositional variation in different situations, and therefore it's inappropriate and misleading to classify people into select personality types.

The Research-Consulting Gap

There's considerable discrepancy between the academic and consultant view of personality. More specifically, the generic classification of individuals into a few distinct categories is big business in the world of industrial consulting. For example, when I ask participants at professional-development workshops whether they've taken the Myers-Briggs personality assessment, almost 50% raise an affirmative hand.

Also, because of its simplicity and vast internet marketing, the True Colors[®] typology is becoming increasingly popular in the corporate world. Don Lowry, creator of this positive and enticing view of personality, claims the four-category personality ranking provided by the True Colors[®] program has enabled millions of people to improve their lives and enhance their professional and personal relationships. Here I offer a contrary perspective.

Personality States vs. Traits

In prior *ISHN* articles, I've addressed the role of a variety of personality differences related to injury prevention, including the success seeker vs. failure avoider (February 2004), the high anxious vs. low anxious individual (April 2004), the "Big Five" personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (July 2005), Type A vs. Type B behaviors vs. emotions, the True Colors[®] approach (July 2007), and last month I defined the "actively-caring" disposition.

Each of these personality presentations refers to the distinction between flexible personality *states* that fluctuate according to behavioral context versus relatively permanent personality *traits*, presumably the result of genetics and early childhood experiences. I've pointed out in more than one *ISHN* contribution (especially in August 2004), that people-based interventions should target person states rather than traits, because personality traits are essentially immutable.

The True Colors[®] Approach

The workshop I attended on True Colors[®] and the related books I read on this four-color classification system were quite convincing. In fact, I rationalized the accuracy of my own color ranking, and taught this typology approach to my students. As discussed in my August 2007

ISHN contribution, I even attempted to predict the primary colors of my students and friends, and was delighted in the apparent accuracy of most of my predictions.

I now realize I was overly optimistic about the True Colors[®] typology. Following a search of the professional literature, I found no supportive research for this widely-disseminated trait theory, and the seminal research of Walter Mischel and others convinces me this and other personality typologies are oversimplified and misleading. Indeed, Dr. Mischel refers to taxonomic systems which attempt to fit people into fixed positions on a limited number of dimensions as “mental fictions.”

Most importantly, the labels people give themselves from pop-psychology personality tests can limit their goals and aspirations, and make them victims of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Let’s consider the empirical research that challenges the common notion that an individual’s personality can be categorized according to a few personality traits.

Situational Determinants of Personality

Substantial applications of the scientific method have attempted to show that a person’s behavior in a certain situation can be predicted by a personality scale. Numerous individual differences in dispositions have been studied, from the Big Five traits to measures of sociability, dependency, and aggression. The consistent finding: A person’s ranking in virtually any personality measure varies substantially across diverse settings, making it impossible to identify a generic cross-situational disposition for anyone.

In one early attempt to demonstrate a stable personality trait, Theodore Newcomb studied extroversion-introversion (one of the Myers-Briggs dimensions) among 51 boys in 21 situations at a summer camp. He laboriously collected daily records of distinctly remembered incidents per individual, such as “How much of the time did he talk at dinner?” Newcomb was shocked to find

minimal consistency of the extraversion-introversion characteristic across situations, and consequently switched the focus of his career to study the culture of Bennington College as a social psychologist.

More than 50 years after Newcomb's classic study, Walter Mischel and colleagues searched for cross-situational consistency of a number of personality dimensions. Armed with video cameras and computers, unavailable in Newcomb's landmark study, these researchers observed participants over many hours and weeks with high reliability among well-trained observers.

The result: An individual's personality-related behavior in one situation (such as aggression) did not reliably predict the person's behavior in a different situation. On the other hand, an individual's personality ranking did reliably predict behavior in designated situations. For example, a particular camper might not be generally more aggressive than other boys, but consistently show this personality dimension under certain circumstances.

The "If-Then Behavioral Signature"

Although systematic attempts to identify generic personality types have been futile, Dr. Mischel and colleagues have shown that certain dispositional factors do dramatically influence behavior. However, it's critical to consider the situation. In other words, one's personality ranking is situation-specific. Mischel refers to the power of environmental contributions to influence distinct personality characteristics and related actions, thoughts, and feelings as "if-then behavioral signatures".

Regarding safety-related behavior, our challenge becomes one of defining what situations, including interpersonal interactions, activate at-risk behavior. But this "if-then behavioral signature" likely varies across individuals. For me, I confess that driving often

activates an undesirable personality disposition, including frustration, aggression, and at-risk behavior. However, I actually score low on generic personality assessments of aggression, frustration, and neuroticism; and I score relatively high on measures of self-discipline and emotional control. But behind the wheel of a vehicle with heavy traffic thwarting my destination goals, I often take on a very different personality.

In Conclusion

Findings from more than 50 years of empirical research indicate it's misleading to categorize people into generic personality types. For example, a person's Myers-Briggs typology and True Colors® ranking change considerably as a function of the situation. Personally, my primary color is orange (competitive) on the tennis court, blue (compassionate) when counseling a student, green (inquisitive) when creating a research study, and gold (organized) when planning a work week at the University.

So have fun with those pop-psychology personality inventories, but use them only to appreciate the diversity of human dynamics. Consider how different situations influence how you think, feel, and act. And most importantly, value your perceptive and discriminative ability to alter your personality and your actions according to ever-changing circumstances.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply human dynamics to industrial safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller's books on People-Based Safety, including his latest: *The Courage Factor*, coauthored by Bob Veazie. For more information, please log on to www.people-based-safety.com; call SPS at 540-951-7233, or Coastal at 1-800-767-7703, ext 3313