Personality Psychology

Interview with an Expert
Associate Professor Simon Boag

Conducted by Kayley Zielinski-Nicolson

Associate Professor Simon Boag's key areas of expertise are personality theory and assessment, theoretical psychology, and research methods and he is particularly interested in personality dynamics and the possibility of personality change. Simon has written extensively on psychodynamic theory, dreams, defence mechanisms, and has edited two volumes on psychoanalysis and philosophy of mind. Simon has also written on the history of personality psychology in Australia and edited two books presenting collections of Australian personality research. Currently, Simon is interested in the relationship between personality, health psychology, and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

If you are interested in learning more about these psychology research areas, Simon teaches on PSYU2234 Social and Personality Psychology, PSYU3336 Personality & its Disorders, PSYH4464/PSYM7764 - Science and Practice of Psychology in Context, and he is the BPhil/MRes Co-ordinator in Psychology.

In his spare time, Simon can be found engaging in organic & native gardening, running, bushwalking, native bee keeping, and learning German.

Why is understanding personality psychology important to society?

> 66 Personality psychology...addresses the bigger picture of what it means to be human. 99

Personality is typically defined as the relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that characterise a person's responses to life situations. The field of personality research is, itself, very broad, extending from genetic and neuroscientific research to the study of interpersonal relationships, along with social and cultural phenomena. Understanding personality helps us to both predict what people do under varying circumstances and to identify the possible causes for this.

There are numerous ways that understanding personality is important to society. Humans are social animals, and personality is important for understanding the different ways that we treat others. Take for instance, what is known as the dark triad of personality. The dark triad involves three socially noxious personality traits: narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. A highly narcissistic person has an inflated sense of self-importance and sense of entitlement, along with a lack of both empathy and a capacity for intimacy. Someone high in psychopathy, on the other hand, is a social predator who has a cruel disregard for others and lacks any remorse or guilt for their actions.

Machiavellianism, named after the Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), reflects an amoral, manipulative personality trait and someone who is happy to maximise self-interest via deception. Each of these traits alone can be socially toxic, but when taken together, you have an arrogant, callous, dishonest, manipulative, socially malevolent character who will happily cheat and exploit others for selfish gain.

The dark triad has also recently been extended to become the dark tetrad, which includes the three dark triad traits described above, along with the addition 'everyday sadism', a trait associated with enjoying both cruelty and inflicting suffering upon others. Individuals displaying dark tetrad traits can have a devasting impact upon the community, and so understanding why people may be like this, and predicting what dark triad individuals might do, is important for society.

By way of example, consider the internet and cyber-space, where we are all increasingly carrying out our social lives (especially in lockdown). The online world is replete with socially toxic activities such as cyber-aggression, which includes acts such as cyber-bullying and trolling. We know that up to 40% of adolescents report being cyber-bullied, and that the dark triad, and in particular psychopathy, consistently predict who is likely to be a cyber-bully. On the other hand, the dark tetrad is a consistent predictor of online trolling behaviour, where 'everyday sadism' stands out as predicting who will engage in trolling.

Alternatively, understanding personality also provides insight into some of the leading causes of death within the community. In Australia in 2017-2019, the leading cause of death in adolescence and young adults (15-24 years) was suicide (making up 37% of deaths). This is a national community emergency, and something that needs to be urgently addressed. We also know that certain personality disorders and traits are associated with an increased risk of suicide. Particularly noteworthy here is Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), a disorder characterised by identity disturbances, emotional instability, and a pattern of intense, unstable relationships. Up to 10% of people with BPD die from suicide, and borderline personality traits (where people display borderline characteristics), are also associated with an increased risk of self-harm. In a recent study we conducted using data from prisoner samples, we found that the best predictors of engaging in self-harm were borderline personality traits (out of 29 other known predictors of suicide). This is not to say that all self-harm is related to borderline personality, but what it does mean is that if can accurately and reliably identify borderline traits, then we can potentially know who might be at risk of increased self-harm and then take precautions to prevent that.

What do you find is the most interesting aspect of researching personality psychology?

There are many aspects of personality psychology that I find interesting, but what I perhaps find most interesting about personality psychology is that in many ways it addresses the bigger picture of what it means to be a human. The major theories of personality, whether they be psychoanalysis or humanistic psychology, are essentially theories of human nature. Such theories have implications for understanding what we can expect from people in terms of either helpful or harmful actions, along with how we might promote the aspects of humanity that we value, and minimise those that we do not.

This makes personality research interesting because it means, when you study personality, that you tend to study basically every domain of psychological research, whether it be neuroscience or social psychology. Furthermore, you are not just trying to understand how any specific 'part' operates in isolation, but instead, aiming to understand how the various parts all fit together to contribute to the 'whole' person. As you may know from your undergraduate studies, the discipline of psychology is made up of various sub-fields, such as perception, neuroscience, and development psychology, all of which make valuable contributions within their specialized domains.

However, personality research is attempting to provide a synthesis of these various areas of psychology and provide us with a view of how these domains all fit and work together to make a complete person. Of course, whether personality theories actually provide a successful synthesis is entirely another matter (but that is also what makes this venture interesting, too!).

Knowing how the various parts fit together to make the whole person is also important for making sense of both psychopathology generally and in particular personality disorders. Personality disorders, which include Borderline Personality Disorder described above, are one of the most debilitating class of disorders and can have devastating consequences for both the individuals involved, their families, and the broader community. The field of personality research itself emerged initially out of what is sometimes described 'Abnormal psychology', and the various theories of personality provide a means for understanding what might go wrong in personality development, along with why therapy might be effective. On the flipside to this, theories of personality also potentially help us to understand what healthy psychological functioning means, and what is necessary for mental health, such as whether we have certain psychological needs that must be met for healthy psychological functioning.

An excellent example of a personality theory that contributes both to understanding both healthy psychological development and risks for developing psychopathology is attachment theory. Although commonly taught in developmental psychology, attachment theory has its roots in John Bowlby's psychodynamic theory, which provided an alternative to the standard Freudian view. Attachment theory has arguably provided us with an understanding of the most important psychological needs in human psychological development, which, when met, help people to lead happy and productive lives, but when neglected, can oftentimes have devastating consequences, especially in relation to traumatisation in early childhood.

What is the most exciting development in current personality research?

There are many exciting things going on currently in personality research. If I had to choose one development, then I think that cross-cultural research in personality would be it. Cross-cultural research is vitally important for a global understanding of humanity. Historically, however, psychology research has primarily occurred in WEIRD contexts (i.e., Western Educated Industrialised Rich Democratic contexts: i.e., Psychology first year students). There isn't anything necessarily wrong with WEIRDos (some of my best friends are WEIRD), but this does raise the question concerning whether our theories and findings apply to other cultural contexts (and we know that it isn't always so).

How might cross-cultural research then relate to personality? One topic of personality research that I am particularly interested in is Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). DID was formerly called Multiple Personality Disorder, and the individual with DID is said to have various personalities within the one body, each with their own thoughts, beliefs, and memories, and each taking control of the body at different times. DID, itself, is a highly controversial area of research, partly because of the link with childhood trauma. Many researchers in the area believe that severe trauma (such a child suffering years of sadistic sexual abuse, perpetrated by a caregiver) can lead to an individual's personality fragmenting into more than one identity as a means of coping with the intolerable and inescapable abuse.

One issue here, though, is that most of what we know about DID is from within western contexts, where DID typically manifests as multiple identities. Nevertheless, it also appears that the role of culture is essential for understanding DID. For instance, the latest version of DSM-5 (published in 2013) acknowledged that DID might manifest differently within different cultural contexts.

More specifically, in non-Western contexts, DID may manifest as possession states, whereby the individual gets taken over (i.e., possessed) by some external force, such as a demon or spirit. Possession states might not be something that many of us are familiar with, if growing up here in Australia (at least, not, for me), but the cross-cultural evidence is fascinating here because such states appear to be a basic part of the cultural fabric in many places around the world (including, incidentally, various Western contexts: think exorcism, for example).

In any case, unfortunately, there isn't a shortage of traumatising experiences occurring to people around the world, and this might lead to DID in certain cultural settings being expressed in terms of possession states, rather than as multiple identities. For instance, a 2010 study of 941 adults in post-civil war Mozambique found that at least 18.6% of sample were possessed by one spirit and that a further 5.6% were possessed by two or more spirits. Taken together, this meant that one fifth of the sample were experiencing possession states, possibly indicating a culturally-congruent form of DID in response to traumatisation from the civil war. Of course, demonstrating causality between trauma and DID possession is impossible in such examples, but the possibility that this may be so really needs to be seriously considered.