

THE REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY: PERSONALITY AND ITS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

In this unit, we return to the question of individual identity, and particularly the question of personality. Vivien Burr, 'The notion of personality is so firmly embedded in our thinking that we hardly, if ever, question it' (1996: 17).



Task B3.3.1

- Before you read Text B3.3.1, write down (in about ten sentences) a description of the personality of a good friend.

Burr, V. (1996) *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*, London: Routledge, pp. 21–28 (extracts)

TEXT B3.3.1
V. Burr

Problems with the traditional view of personality

... the idea of 'personality' is one that we use in our everyday lives in order to try to make sense of the things that we and other people do. 'Personality' can then come to be seen as a theory (one held very widely in our society) for explaining human behaviour, and for trying to anticipate our part in social interactions with others. We could say that in our daily lives we act as if there were such a thing as personality, and most of the time we get by reasonably well by doing so. But it is a big leap from this to saying that personality really exists (in the sense of traits inhabiting our mental structures, or being written into our genetic material).

Deconstruction:

National stereotypes guides us through interactions with people from other nations, personality explains why somebody acts in a specific way-

Another weak point in the 'personality really exists' argument is this. If personality does really exist in this way, then we are describing part of human nature. We should expect to find 'personality' as we know it in all human beings, no matter what part of the world they inhabit or what period of history they may have occupied. But it is clear that all peoples do not subscribe to our western view. In some cultures, people account for their actions by reference to invisible spirits and demons and would find our idea that behaviour originates in personality a very strange one...

Personality does not exist-in other parts of the world, spirits/demons guide the ways in which people act

The uniqueness and private nature of much of what we mean by 'personality' is also not a feature of all cultures. For example, we tend to think of our emotions as private events that are bound up with the kind of people we are. A person with a 'depressive' personality might be expected to feel 'sadness' often. We imagine a 'caring' person to have 'loving' feelings. These feelings or emotions are thought of as the internal, private experience of individuals, and are intimately connected to the type of person they are. For example, anger is something we feel inside us, and which is manifested in the things we say and do. However, as Lutz (1982, 1990) has pointed out, this is not the case in all cultures. For the Ifaluk (Samoan and Pintupi Aborigine), emotion words are statements not about people's internal states but about their relationship to events and other people. The Ifaluk talk of song, which in translation comes out as something like 'justifiable anger'. This justifiable anger is not a privately owned feeling, but a moral and public account of some transgression of accepted social practices and values.

Western world perceives feelings as something individual and private. In other cultures, feeling are about the relationship between events and people (external)

Of course, we could claim that these cultural differences are due to differences in education and understanding. We could suggest that non-western cultures (and those of previous historical periods) do not have the benefit of our knowledge. What we would be doing then is making a claim about the truthfulness of our own view as opposed to the falsity of theirs. We would be saying, 'We know that in fact people have personalities, and that the way people behave is heavily influenced by their personality. People in other cultures have not realised this yet, and they therefore hold a false view of reality.' This is to state the case rather strongly, but it makes the point that unless we have complete

confidence in the 'personality really exists' view, we have to accept that personality may be a theory which is peculiar to certain societies at a particular point in time.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the fundamental assumptions of the common-sense view of personality is that personality is stable across situations and over time. However, this does not stand up to scrutiny when we examine our own day-to-day experience. Do you behave in the same way when you are in the pub with your mates and when you are taking tea with Great-uncle Eric? (I'm sure you can find your own equivalents.) Do you talk to your closest friend in the same way as to your bank manager? Do you feel confident, outgoing and 'on the ball' when you are at a party with people you know? What about when you go for a job interview? These examples may look trivial, and you will probably already be coming up with explanations for the differences. But the overall message is an important one. We think and feel differently depending on whom we are with, what we are doing, and why...

Personality is stable. However, we act differently depending on the context.

What might it mean, then, to say that personality is socially constructed? One way of looking at this is to think of personality (the kind of person you are) as existing not within people but between them. This is hard to conceptualize at first, so I will give you some illustrative examples. Take some of the personality-type words we use to describe people: for example, friendly, caring, shy, self-conscious, charming, bad-tempered, thoughtless. If you like, make your own list of words you could use to describe the people you know. I would predict that most of them will be words which would completely lose their meaning if the person described were living alone on a desert island. Without the presence of other people, i.e. a social environment, can a person be said to be 'friendly', 'shy' or 'caring'? The point is that we use these words as if they referred to entities existing within the person they describe, but once the person is removed from their relations with others the words become meaningless. They refer to our behaviour towards other people. The friendliness, shyness or caring exists not inside people, but in the relation between them...

Personality traits do not exist within us, some of them are related to the relationship we have with other people .
e.g- friendliness

Next, think of a person you know, someone with whom you are more than just slightly acquainted. Think about how you are when you are with that person. Perhaps you feel that when you are with her or him you are level-headed and rational. She or he always seems to be leaping from one crisis to another and seems to be in awe of your apparent ability to take the world in your stride. The nature of the relationship between you is one of counsellor and client, or 'the strong one' and 'the weak one'. Now think of someone else with whom you are just the opposite. With this person you always seem to be pouring out your troubles, asking advice and taking the lead from him or her. Perhaps this particular example does not fit you, but you will be able to think of comparable ones. The point is that it makes no sense to ask which of these is the real you. They both are, but each version of 'you' is a product of your relationships with others. Each 'you' is constructed socially, out of the social encounters that make up your relationships...

Many versions of 'you' that exists depending on the relationship we have with others.

Personality is actually socially constructed.

Deconstruction:

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Task B3.3.2

- Read the description you wrote down of your friend's personality in Task B3.3.1. Does your description include in it any indication that your friend's personality might vary depending on: the situation your friend might be in; the different people your friend might be with; any reference to events, actions or behaviour that involve your friend?