

## Does Personality Matter in life

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Memory Nguwi caught up with Professor Wendy Johnson to explore the impact of personality on life outcomes. Wendy Johnson is Professor of Differential Development at the University of Edinburgh in the United Kingdom. She researches interplay between genetic and environmental influences on personal characteristics, especially cognitive abilities, and life outcomes involving health and well-being.

### **MN: What is individual personality and can it be changed or improved?**

WJ: Individual personality is defined differently by different personality psychologists. Most definitions involve some idea of relatively consistent patterns of behaviour. But these patterns are conceived by some as (and thus defined as being) the results of experiences and immediate situational ‘presses’ transactions with latent, inherent, dispositional ‘traits’ present at birth and largely biologically ‘hardwired’ in some way, while others conceive of and define personality as a summary of such behaviour patterns that ‘emerges’ through ongoing biological adaptation to the environment. In other words, to some personality is the cause of behaviour, while to others it is the result. The field doesn’t address this rather fundamental inconsistency in conception nearly as much as it needs to. The specific behaviour patterns of interest and research focus also vary considerably. They can be highly specific and idiosyncratic, such as tendencies to see frogs in Rorschach figures, or really, really broad, such as tendencies to experience positive emotions, or anywhere in between. The currently most dominant Five-Factor Model of personality carves it up into the five very broad traits of extraversion, neuroticism (or its presumed opposite emotional stability), conscientiousness, agreeableness, and openness/intellect, but most personality psychologists also carve these very broad traits up into more specific aspects and facets and so on. As well, there are areas of personality such as aggression, religiosity, honesty, introversion, and risk-taking that this model doesn’t address well at all. In general, it doesn’t assess behaviours that are often not socially desirable very well. There is considerable evidence that personality does change normatively throughout the lifespan, becoming generally more ‘mature’ – more conscientious, agreeable, emotionally stable, open, and extraverted (which is also to say more socially desirable) -- in young adulthood in particular. But there is considerable individual variation around the normative patterns. As well, there is considerable evidence that effectively all major forms of psychological counselling tend to enable changes in behaviours that impact scores on personality tests. And the specific behaviours used to measure it often reflect habits, which can be broken and acquired.

### **MN: What is emotional intelligence and can it be changed or improved?**

WJ: Emotional intelligence is also defined and measured differently by researchers and practitioners with different foci. Most definitions involve ideas of it as capacities or tendencies to be aware of, express, and manage one’s own emotions, to interpret others’ emotions appropriately so that one can interchange with them empathetically and judiciously, and to give emotional information a prominent

role in thinking and behaviour. Some consider and measure it more as an ability analogous to general intelligence, while others consider it to be more dispositional in character, analogous to personality. It too shows normative patterns of change, generally increasing with age, especially during adolescence and young adulthood. It may fall of in older adulthood, however. Like any other skills, the specific skills that are used to measure it can be improved with skill-specific training, The ways in which emotional intelligence is measured reflect the diversity in its definitions, and none of them shows very good psychometric properties, unlike most cognitive ability measures. Those who think of it as an ability use tests presenting hypothetical situations and asking examinees to indicate the ‘best’ among several potential action options to deal with the situations. The responses are judged correct or not based on consensus of ‘experts’ or ‘most people’. Some also use photos of people with emotional expressions and ask examinees to identify the emotions expressed. Those who think of emotional intelligence more like personality collect self- and other-reports of behavioural and motivational tendencies to respond in various ways involving emotions to presented scenarios or circumstances.

**MN: Which specific personality dimensions are related to positive life outcomes in the workplace and life in general?**

WJ: This depends on the particular personality model under which personality is measured, as well as the job or other life circumstance under consideration. But under the Five-Factor Model and as a big generality, conscientiousness is related to good job performance and favourable life outcomes, as are extraversion, emotional stability, and openness. Reflecting limitations of this model, agreeableness is related quite consistently to poor job performance and many poor health and other life outcomes. Not surprisingly, extraversion is more relevant in sales positions than computer programming though, for example.

**MN: Are there some undesirable personality types?**

WJ: I don’t think I’d use the word ‘types’, but there are certainly undesirable behaviour patterns. Dishonesty is one, for sure, as is tendency to ‘fly off the handle’ in anger. Arrogance is rarely popular, nor are meanness/cruelty and greed. These are just a few examples.

**MN: Is there any need to assess both personality and emotional intelligence when selecting employees?**

WJ: Need is one thing; desirability another. It certainly can be valuable to assess each of them, but both are heavily subject to ‘faking good’ in situations with any stakes such as job assessments – giving socially desirable responses whether those are actually how one would act or not.

**MN: There are people described as having personality disorders such as narcissists and psychopaths. What are these disorders and how are they linked to life outcomes?**

WJ: Narcissism is tendency to view oneself as particularly worthy of admiration, physically or personally or both. It often involves arrogance, putting others down to raise oneself up, selfishness, and superficial charisma that erodes with greater exposure to the narcissist. As well, there is often an

underlying insecurity that all that admiration isn't really deserved, which can manifest in ugly ways of treating others. Narcissists often do have some real ability, and that and their initial charm can carry them quite a ways in life. But when the charm wears off, they often 'fall' rather hard. Psychopathy is characterised by persistent antisocial behaviour, egotism, bold and disinhibited behaviours, meanness/cruelty, violence, and lack of remorse and empathy, coupled with superficial charm similar to that of narcissists. They often wind up on the wrong side of the law, though smart ones can often get away with a lot using that superficial charm. All psychopathologies seem to remit somewhat with age, and these two are no exception.

**MN: Is there any relationship between personality and career choices people make?**

WJ: Oh, sure! But interests and aspirations matter more, and many people end up in occupations that require them to develop skills rather contrary to their dispositional inclinations. Perhaps one of the most common of these is rather introverted people who seek jobs that require quite a bit of public speaking.

**MN: Individual integrity is important in most if not all professional roles. How can this be assessed for the benefit of organisations?**

WJ: That's a tough one because it's extremely easy to fake honest behaviours, and those who have least integrity are most likely to fake them. I don't know of anyone who claims to have accomplished this reliably. Though actuarial methods consistently outperform subjective assessments such as interviews and references in selecting candidates that prove to be effective employees, this may be one area in which those subjective methods, especially references and reputation (if available) do better.

**MN: I have seen a lot of coaching programs targeting change in people's personalities and emotional intelligence. Is that possible and if so how?**

WJ: As noted above, effectively all psychological counselling methods tend to change the responses people make to personality assessments. This indicates that, even if personality and emotional intelligence consist of inherent, hard-wired dispositions and capacities, some of their manifestations can be changed. To whatever extent they are instead collections of skills and habits that define these constructs, they can be changed simply by training the relevant skills, breaking 'bad habits' and instilling good ones. Either way or in combination, much depends on motivation and desire to change on the part of the person in which change is targeted. Interventions that people experience as fun and during which they can observe progress are very helpful in maintaining them.

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