

CLARIFY



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Further Reading / 'Context is King' / 'Belonging' (extract) – Geoffrey L.Cohen

Although the 'Fundamental Attribution Error' is apparent in many if not most cultures, it is especially strong in the United States and other individualistic cultures. In these cultures, we tend to attribute life successes or failures to assets *within* individuals, like diligence and intelligence, while ignoring the importance of assets like trust and belonging that take their form as relations *between* individuals.

A result of this peculiar way of thinking is that Americans have created a cult of personality, buying into the notion that people's personalities and potential can be summed up in a set of measurable traits, using tests such as the Myers-Briggs, and that people neatly fall into "types". We should have learned to question that contention long ago.

In 1968, Walter Mischel lobbed a grenade into the edifice of personality research by exposing the poor predictive power of personality tests. Researchers would measure a trait such as honesty and then use people's scores on it to predict their behaviour. They investigated whether a child who scores high in honesty actually behaves honestly and whether a child who behaves honestly in one situation behaves honestly in others. To their surprise the correlations were tiny. At best, only 4 percent to 10 percent of the differences among people could be explained by some underlying personality trait.

Five decades after Mischel conducted that research, we still haven't listened to the findings. When I was growing up in the 1980s, my father worked in industry, and he was a big fan of the Myers-Briggs test. First conceived in the 1920s by the mother-daughter team of Katherine Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers – two devoted homemakers, novelists and amateur psychoanalysts – the Myers-Briggs test was designed to bring the gospel of the psychologist Carl Jung to the masses. The instrument is now used by 80 percent of Fortune 500 companies and thousands of clinical and health centers throughout the world. My father prided himself on being able to instantly classify a person into a Myers-Briggs category, and he did this with gusto for all family members. He would read our fortunes and futures, always with confidence in the objectivity of his prognostications. That's why it was a surprise to me to learn years later that the Myers-Briggs is horrible at predicting people's work and life outcomes. In fact, it's barely more predictive than astrology – which is to say that the Myers-Briggs is, by and large, not predictive at all. Of course, there are more valid measures of personality than Myers-Briggs, but the overwhelming conclusion across a large body of studies is that personality matters less than we think while the situation matters more than we think.

None of this research means that personality does not exist. It just means that our way of conceptualizing it is far from ideal. Even Walter Mischel demonstrated that people have consistent 'behavioural signatures' over time, patterns of behaviour that stretch, like a personal autograph, over wide-ranging situations. Some kids are honest with grown-ups but not with their peers. Some people are hardworking at work but lazy with household chores.

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No one else is quite like you in your quirky, idiosyncratic pattern across different situations. If we spent more time getting to know individuals and understanding their nuances and perspectives, we'd be better able to predict them...

In general, we overestimate how much of a team or an organisation's performance, and even the quality of our own relationships, depends on picking the right people rather than creating the right conditions for them to thrive."