

Is Personality In the Genes?

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Why do people have different personalities? What do we mean by “personality”?

Personality includes those aspects that are consistent and cut across many facets of the person’s life.

In trying to understand how much certain factors influence personality we have to think in terms of variation across people. For any particular personality trait, like shyness, there is a certain amount of difference or variation among people. Why?

Two general possibilities come to mind: the experiences we have (learning) and the genes we bring into the world. For most personality traits, researchers have found that about half of the variation across individuals is due to genetic differences.

The importance of genetic factors often surprises people. They protest, “I’m not like my parents, and my siblings are very different from me.”

However, when psychologists use the term “genetic” they do not mean simply passed on from parents to children. Even though we each received our genes from our parents, we are not an exact copy of either parent. Each of us is a

unique combination of genes received from each parent.

When genes from each of our parents came together to form our siblings, they did so in different ways than in creating us. The one exception? Identical twins. Here the two individuals developed from a single fertilized egg, so they are genetically identical.

Identical twins are often treated very similarly (right down to being dressed in matching outfits). So, we might expect identical twins to have very similar personalities as a result.

Now, imagine sets of identical twins who were separated very early in life, raised by different families. Such twins exist, most of whom never knew they were a twin. Researchers are very interested in such twins, and have reunited these twins in adulthood. It’s from studying these people that researchers have been able to conclude that about half of the variation in personalities is due to genetics.

Because most of us do not have an identical twin, we compare ourselves to siblings and parents. Now that we understand what is meant by “genetic,” we can appreciate how it is possible to be very different from our family, and yet still be influenced by

the genes we were dealt.

Understanding what’s meant by “genetic” also helps us appreciate why great individuals in history could be so different from their parents and siblings.

Most superstars in science, art, and athletics had siblings, and all had parents. The brilliant person shared genes with parents and siblings, yet none shared the unique combination of genes that made up the outstanding person. So usually the parents and siblings are not superstars.

Does all this focus on genes mean that parents have little influence? No, but it is important to consider how our inborn personalities affected our interactions with our parents. Parents treat children differently based on children’s personalities. Plus, our personalities affected how we interpreted and responded to what happened to us as children.

How are you different from your siblings? How might your parents have treated you differently as a result? How might some of the experiences you shared with your siblings affected you differently because of your personality?