Nice to Know You: What Defines a Person?

From *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference:*

…What we think of as inner states – perceptions and emotions – are actually powerfully and imperceptibly influenced by seemingly inconsequential personal influences, by a newscaster we watch for a few minutes a day or by someone we sit next to, in silence, in a two-minute experiment. The same thing is true for certain environments – that in ways we don't necessarily appreciate, our inner states are the result of our outer circumstances. The field of psychology is rich with experiments that demonstrate this fact. Let me give you just a few examples.

In the early 1970s, a group of social scientists at Stanford University, led by Philip Zambardo, decided to create a mock prison in the basement of the university's psychology building. They took a thirty-five-foot section of corridor and created a cell block with a prefabricated wall. Three small, six-by-nine-foot cells were created from laboratory rooms and given steel-barred, black-painted doors. A closet was turned into a solitary-confinement cell. The group then advertised in the local papers for volunteers, men who would agree to participate in the experiment. Seventy-five people applied, and from those Zimbardo and his colleagues picked the 21 who appreared the most normal and healthy on psychological tests. Half of the group were chosen, at random, to be guards, and were given uniforms and dark glasses and told that their responsibility was to keep order in the prison. The other half were told that they were to be prisoners. Zimbardo got the Palo Alto Police Department to "arrest" the prisoners in their homes, cuff them, bring them to the station house, charge them with a fictitious crime, fingerprint them, then blindfold them and bring them to the prison in the Psychology Department basement. Then they were stripped and given a prison uniform to wear, with a number on the front and back that was to serve as their only means of identification for the duration of their incarceration.

The purpose of the experiment was to try to find out why prisons are such nasty places. Was it because prisons are full of nasty people, or was it because prisons are such nasty environments that they make people nasty? The answer will help resolve a more general question: how much influence does immediate environment have on the way people behave?

What Zimbardo found out shocked him. The guards, some of whom had previously identified themselves as pacifists, fell quickly into the role of hard-bitten disciplinarians. The first night they woke the prisoners up at two in the morning and made them do pushups, line up against the wall, and perform other arbitrary tasks. On the morning of the second day, the prisoners rebelled. They ripped off their numbers and barricaded themselves in their cells. The guards responded by stripping them, spraying them with fire extinguishers, and throwing the leader of the rebellion into the solitary-confinement closet. "There were times when we were pretty abusive, getting right in their faces and yelling at them," one guard remembers. "It was part of the whole atmosphere of terror."

As the experiment progressed, the guards got systematically crueler and more sadistic. "What we were unprepared for was the intensity of the change and the speed at which it happened," Zimbardo says. The guards were making the prisoners say to one another they loved each other, and making them march down the hallway, in handcuffs, with paper bags over their heads. "It was completely the opposite from the way I conduct myself now," another guard remembers. "I think I was positively creative in terms of my mental cruelty."

After 36 hours, one prisoner began to get hysterical, and had to be released. Four more then had to be released because of "extreme emotional depression, crying, rage, and acute anxiety." Zimbardo had originally intended to have the experiment run for two weeks. He called it off after six days. "I realize now," one prisoner said after the experiment was over, "that no matter how together I thought I was inside my head, my prisoner behavior was often less under my control than I realized." Another said: "I began to feel that I was losing myself, that the person I call myself, the person who had volunteered to put me in this prison, was distant from me, was remote, until finally I wasn't that person. I was 416. I was really my number and 416 was really going to have to decide what to do."

Zimbardo's conclusion was that there are specific situations so powerful that they can overwhelm our inherent predispositions. The key word here is *situation.* Zimbardo isn't talking about environment, about the major external influences on all of our lives. He's not denying that how we are raised by our parents affects who we are, or that the kind of schools we went to, the friends we have, or the neighborhoods we live in affect our behavior. All of these things are undoubtedly important. Nor is he denying that our genes play a role in who we are. Most psychologists believe that nature – genetics – accounts for about half of the reason why we tend to act the way we do. His point is simply that there are certain times and places and conditions when much of that can be swept away, that there are instances where you can take normal people from good schools and happy families and good neighborhoods and powerfully affect their behavior merely by changing the immediate details of their situation.

This same argument was made, perhaps more explicitly, in the 1920s in a landmark set of experiments by two New York-based researchers, Hugh Hartshorne and M.A. May. Hartshorne and May took as their subjects about eleven thousand schoolchildren between the ages of eight and sixteen, and over the course of several months gave them literally dozens of tests, all designed to measure honesty. The types of tests that Hartshorne and May used are quite central to their conclusion, so I'll identify a number of them in some detail.

One set, for example, was simple aptitude tests developed by the Institute for Educational Research, a precursor to the group that now develops the SATs. In the sentence completion test, children were asked to fill in words that had been left blank. For example: "The poor little _____ has _____ nothing to _____; he is hungry." In the arithmetic test, children were given math questions like "When sugar costs 10 cents a pound, how much will five pounds cost?" and were asked to write their answers in the margin. The tests were given in only a fraction of the time usually needed for completion, so most children had lots of unanswered questions, and when the time was up the tests were collected and graded. The following day the students were given the same kinds of test again, with questions that were different but of equal difficulty. This time, though, the students were given an answer key and, under minimal supervision, told to grade their own papers. Hartshorne and May, in other words, had set up a sting operation. With the answers in hand and lots of unanswered questions, the students had ample opportunity to cheat. And with the previous day's tests in hand, Hartshorne and May could compare the first day's answers to the second, and get a good sense of how much each student was cheating.

Another set of tests was what are called speed tests, much simpler measures of ability. Students were given 56 pairs of numbers and told to add them. Or they were shown a sequence of several hundred randomly arranged letters of the alphabet and asked to read through them and

underline all the A's. Students were allowed a minute to complete each of these tests. Then they were given another set of equivalent tests, only this time the time limit wasn't enforced at all, allowing the students to keep on working if they wanted to.

In all, the two psychologists administered countless different tests in countless different situations. They had children undertake tests of physical ability, like chin-ups or broad jumps, and secretly observed them to see whether they cheated in reporting how well they did. They gave students tests to do at home, where they had ample opportunity to use dictionaries or ask for help, and compared those results to how they did on similar tests administered at school, where cheating was impossible. In the end, their results fill three thick volumes and, along the way, challenge a lot of preconceptions of what character is.

The first conclusion is, unsurprisingly, that lots of cheating goes on. In one case, the scores on tests where cheating was possible were 50 percent higher, on average, than the "honest" scores. When Hartshorne and May began to look for patterns in the cheating, some of their findings were equally obvious. Smart children cheat a little less than intelligent children. Girls cheat about as much as boys. Older children cheat more than younger children, and those from stable and happy homes cheat a bit less than those from unstable and unhappy homes. If you analyze the data you can find general patterns of behavioral consistency from test to test.

But the consistency isn't nearly as high as you might expect. There isn't one tight little circle of cheaters and one tight little circle of honest students. Some kids cheat at home but not at school; some kids cheat at school but not at home. Whether or not a child cheated on, say, the word completion test was not an iron-clad predictor of whether he or she would cheat on, say, the underlining-A's part of the speed test. If you gave the same group of kids the same test, under the same circumstances six months apart, Hartshorne and May found, the same kids would cheat in the same ways in both cases. But once you changed any of those variables – the material on the test, or the situation in which it was administered – the kinds of cheating would change as well.

What Hartshorne and May concluded, then, is that something like honesty isn't a fundamental trait, or what they called a "unified" trait. A trait like honesty, they concluded, is considerably influenced by the situation. "Most children," they wrote,

> will deceive in certain situations and not in others. Lying, cheating, and stealing as measured by the test situations used in these studies are only very loosely related. Even cheating in the classroom is rather highly specific, for a child may cheat on an arithmetic test and not on a spelling test, etc. Whether a child will practice deceit in any given situation depends in part on his intelligence, age, home background, and the like – and in part on the nature of the situation itself and his particular relation to it.

This, I realize, seems wildly counterintuitive. If I asked you to describe the personality of your best friends, you could do so easily, and you wouldn't say things like "My friend Howard is incredibly generous, but only when I ask for things, not when his family asks him for things," or "My friend Alice is wonderfully honest when it comes to her personal life, but at work she can be very slippery." You would say, instead, that your friend Howard is generous and your friend Alice is honest. All of us, when it comes to personality, naturally think in terms of absolutes: that a person is a certain way or is not a certain way. But what Zimbardo and Hartshorne and May are suggesting is that this is a

mistake, that when we think only in terms of inherent traits and forget the role of situations, we're deceiving ourselves about the real causes of human behavior.

The mistake we make in thinking of character as something unified and all-encompassing is very similar to a kind of blind spot in the way we process information. Psychologists call this the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE), which is a fancy way of saying that when it comes to interpreting other people's behavior, human beings invariably repeat the mistake of overestimating the importance of fundamental character traits and underestimating the importance of the situation and context. We will always reach for a "dispositional" explanation for events, as opposed to a contextual explanation. In one experiment, for instance, a group of people are told to watch two sets of basketball players, the first of whom are shooting baskets in a well-lit gym and the second of whom are shooting in a badly-lit gym (and obviously missing a lot of shots). Then they are asked to judge how good the players were. The players in the well-lit gym were considered superior.

In another example, a group of people are brought in for an experiment and told they are going to play a quiz game. They are paired off and they draw lots. One person gets a card that says he or she is going to be the "Contestant." The other is told he or she is going to be the "Questioner." The Questioner is then asked to draw up a list of ten "challenging but not impossible" questions based on areas of particular interest or expertise, so someone who is into Ukrainian folk music might come up with a series of questions based on Ukrainian folk music. The questions are posed to the Contestant, and after the quiz is over, both parties are asked to estimate the level of general knowledge of the other. Invariably, the Contestants rate the Questioners as being a lot smarter than they themselves are.

You can do these kinds of experiments a thousand different ways and the answer almost always comes out the same way. This happens even when you give people a clear and immediate environmental explanation of the behavior they are being asked to evaluate: that the gym, in the first case, has few lights on; that the Contestant is being asked to answer the most impossibly biased and rigged set of question. In the end, this doesn't make much difference. There is something in all of us that makes us instinctively want to explain the world around us in terms of people's essential attributes: he's a better basketball players, that person is smarter than I am.

We do this because we are a lot more attuned to personal cues than contextual cues. The FAE also makes the world a much simpler and more understandable place. In recent years, for example, there has been much interest in the idea that one of the most fundamental factors in explaining personality is birth order: older siblings are domineering and conservative, younger siblings more creative and rebellious. When psychologists actually try to verify this claim, however, their answers sound like the Hartshorne and May conclusions. We do reflect the influences of birth order but, as psychologist Judith Harris points out in *The Nurture Assumption,* only around our families. When they are away from their families – in different contexts – older siblings are no more likely to be domineering and younger siblings no more likely to be rebellious than anyone else.

The birth order myth is an example of the FAE in action. But you can see why we are so drawn to it. It is much easier to define people just in terms of their family personality. It's a kind of shorthand. If we constantly have to qualify every assessment of those around us, how would we make sense of the world? How much harder would it be to make the thousands of decisions we are

required to make about whether we like someone or love someone or trust someone or want to give someone advice?

The psychologist Walter Mischel argues that the human mind has a kind of "reducing valve" that "creates and maintains the perception of continuity even in the face of perpetual observed changes in actual behavior." He writes:

> When we observe a woman who seems hostile and fiercely independent some of the time but passive, dependent, and feminine on other occasions, our reducing valve usually makes us choose between the two syndromes. We decide that one pattern is in the service of the other, or that both are in the service of a third motive. She must be a really controlling lady with a façade of passivity – or perhaps she is a warm, passive, dependent woman with a surface defense of aggressiveness. But perhaps nature is bigger than our concepts and it is possible for one woman to be a hostile, fiercely independent, passive, dependent, feminine, aggressive, warm, controlling person all in one. Of course, which of these she is at any particular moment would not be random or capricious – it would depend on who she is with, when, how, and much, much more. But each of these aspects of her self may be a quite genuine and real aspect of her total being.

Character, then, isn't what we think it is or, rather, what we want it to be. It isn't a stable, easily identifiable set of closely related traits, and it only seems that way because of a glitch in the way our brains are organized. Character is more like a bunch of habits and tendencies and interests, loosely bound together and dependent, at certain times, on circumstance and context.

The reason that most of us seem to have a consistent character is that most of us are really good at controlling our environment. I have a lot of fun at dinner parties. As a result, I throw a lot of dinner parties and my friends see me there and think that I'm fun. But if I couldn't have lots of dinner parties, if my friends instead tended to see me in lots of different situations over which I had little or no control – like, say, faced with four hostile youths in a filthy, broken-down subway – they probably wouldn't think of me as fun anymore.

Some years ago, two Princeton University psychologists, John Darley and Daniel Batson, decided to conduct a study inspired by the biblical story of the Good Samaritan. That story tells of a traveler who has been beaten and robbed and left for dead by the side of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Both a priest and a Levite – worthy, pious men – came upon the man but did not stop, "passing by on the other side." The only man to help was a Samaritan – a member of a despised minority – who "went up to him and bound up his wounds" and took him to an inn. Darley and Batson decided to replicate that study at the Princeton Theological Seminary; this was an experiment very much in the tradition of the FAE.

Darley and Batson met with a group of seminarians, individually, and asked each one to prepare a short, extemporaneous talk on a given biblical theme, then walk over to a nearby building to present it. Along the way to the presentation, each student ran into a man slumped in an alley, head down, eyes closed, coughing and groaning. The question was, who would stop and help?

Darley and Batson introduced three variables into the experiment to make its results more meaningful. First, before the experiment even started, they gave the students a questionnaire about why they had chosen to study theology. Did they see religion as a means for personal and spiritual fulfillment? Or were they looking for a practical tool for finding meaning in everyday life? Then they varied the subject of the biblical theme the students were asked to talk about. Some were asked to speak on the relevance of the professional clergy to the religious vocation. Others were given the parable of the Good Samaritan. Finally, the instructions given by the experimenters to each student varied as well. In some of the cases, as he sent the students on their way, the experimenter would look at his watch and say, "Oh, you're late. They were expecting you a few minutes ago. We'd better get moving." In other cases, he would say, "It will be a few minutes before they're ready for you, but you might as well head over now."

If you ask people to predict which seminarians played the Good Samaritan (and subsequent studies have done just this), their answers are highly consistent. They almost all say that the students who entered the ministry to help people and those reminded of the importance of compassion by having just read the parable of the Good Samaritan will be the most likely to stop. Most of us, I think, would agree with these conclusions.

In fact, neither of those factors made any difference. "It is hard to think of a context in which norms concerning helping those in distress are more salient than for a person thinking about the Good Samaritan, and yet it did not significantly increase helping behavior," Darley and Batson concluded. "Indeed, on several occasions, a seminary student going to give his talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as he hurried on his way." The only thing that really mattered was whether the student was in a rush. Of the group that was, 10 percent stopped to help. Of the group who knew they had a few minutes to spare, 63 percent stopped.

What this study is suggesting, in other words, is that the convictions of your heart and the actual contents of your thoughts are less important, in the end, in guiding your actions than the immediate context of your behavior. The words "Oh, you're late" had the effect of making someone who was ordinarily compassionate into someone who was indifferent to suffering – of turning someone, in that particular moment, into a different person.

– Malcolm Gladwell

From *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores the Hidden Side of Everything:*

As any modern parent knows, the baby-naming industry is booming, as evidenced by a proliferation of books, websites, and baby-name consultants. Many parents seem to believe that a child cannot prosper unless it is hitched to the right name; names are seen to carry great aesthetic or even predictive powers.

This might explain why, in 1958, a New York City man named Robert Lane decided to call his baby son Winner. The Lanes, who lived in a housing project in Harlem, already had several children, each with a fairly typical name. But this boy – well, Robert Lane apparently had a special feeling about this one. Winner Lane: how could he fail with a name like that?

Three years later, the Lanes had another baby boy, their seventh and last child. For reasons that no one can quite pin down today, Robert decided to name this boy Loser. It doesn't appear that Robert was unhappy about the new baby; he just seemed to get a kick out of the name's bookend

effect. First a Winner, now a Loser. But if Winner Lane could hardly be expected to fail, could Loser Lane possibly succeed?

Loser Lane did in fact succeed. He went to prep school on a scholarship, graduated from Lafayette College in Pennsylvania, and joined the New York Police Department (this was his mother's longtime wish), where he made detective and, eventually, sergeant. Although he never hid his name, many people were uncomfortable using it. "So I have a bunch of names," he says today, "from Jimmy to James to whatever they want to call you…But they rarely call you Loser." Once in a while, he said, "they throw a French twist on it: 'Losier.'" To his police colleagues, he is known as Lou.

And what of his brother with the can't-miss name? The most noteworthy achievement of Winner Lane, now in his mid-forties, is the sheer length of his criminal record: nearly three dozen arrests for burglary, domestic violence, trespassing, resisting arrest, and other mayhem.

These days, Loser and Winner barely speak. The father who named them is no longer alive. Clearly he had the right idea – that naming is destiny – but he must have gotten the boys mixed up…

– Steven D. Levitt & Stephen J. Dubner

Examples of Discussion/Reflection Prompts

1) How do you feel the name you give your child affects his/her life? What about a nickname, or even an insult? What kind of signal does a child's name send to the world…and does that signal really matter?

2) What's the point of a name? Why do parents care so much about selecting the "correct" names for their children? Why do some people agonize over whether to change their names after marriage, or respond to something other than their given names?

3) How do you feel about your own name? Would you change it under certain circumstances? Have you thought about what you'd want to name your own children? Will those decisions matter?

4) Should we bother trying to affect other peoples' identities? When is it appropriate to extend our influence, and when should we essentially mind our own business?

5) How much control do we have over our own identities? How sensitive are these identities to outside influence, for good or for ill? Please provide examples from your own life.

6) How do these pieces relate to *War, (500) Days of Summer,* and "The Brahmin's Son"?