

## 1

## Introduction: The Quest to Understand the Person

Tina's hand is twitching furiously. Small pearls of sweat are forming on her forehead under the hot morning sun, providing a glistening contrast to her dark hair carefully tight up in a knot. Her dark eyes are wide open, her gaze fixated in trance on a distant point in the colorful crowd. Her nostrils are flaring wildly; was there not so much noise in the temple grounds, we could hear her heavy breathing. With a determined push, the priest breaks her skin and pushes the metal rod through her right cheek until it comes out through her open mouth; the only response from Tina is a hardly noticeable blink of her eyes. With a short prayer, the official inserts the next metal rod into Tina's left cheek, piercing her skin right next to one of the tiny scars from previous years and pushes it until this rod also emerges through her open mouth. Her family and friends are gathered around her, with her husband holding up a black prayer flag over her head, obscuring her from the multitude of curious onlookers. Only the shining ends of the rods protruding from her open mouth are now visible. The priest is attaching some carefully folded money and a bright-red ceremonial fruit to the end of each of the rods still innocently glistening in the early morning sun. The procedure only takes a few minutes, and Tina is now ready to perform her duties. With her hand firmly clenching the snake whip, she rises up determinedly from the plastic chair to face the crowd. In the following hours, she will wander around town, barefoot on burning-hot asphalt, blessing countless spectators and uttering short prayers in people's houses and shops. Only after having finished the prescribed route will she return with her small support group consisting of family and a few friends to the shrine to get the piercings removed. She has a long day ahead of her.

The very same day, half a world away, Sandra is also getting ready for her workday. She looks over her desk as the winter sun is slowly pushing through the clouds. The friendly faces of her parents and her brother are smiling from the framed pictures placed right next to the binders that hold all those papers related to the case she has been working hard on over the last year. Sandra pauses for a moment and smiles back at them. She has a brief flashback to last weekend, when they met at her house for dinner. She is so proud of her younger brother and his little daughter. Sandra quickly reminds herself to ask him for a photo of her niece she can put on her desk. Her eyes wander further along her desk. Piles of notes are neatly folded on the left-hand side. A tiny speck of dust is coming to rest on the black leather folder holding her application. She takes out a tissue from her handbag and wipes it off, using the moment to also quickly wipe down the rest of the neatly organized space in front of her. Her mind wanders. Five more minutes and she will face the committee. As usual on days like this, she has prepared her favorite tea and put it into the special cup that her mom gave her when she left home to go to college. After taking a final sip, she goes to the office kitchen, carefully washes the cup with soap, rinses off the soap with plenty of water, and then takes her personal towel from the drawer to wipe off the water. She hurries back to her desk and places the cup back into her locked drawer. It is time to go; it will take her three minutes to get to the meeting hall, and she wants to be there before the other committee members arrive.

Two individuals, separated by continents, one walking the streets of southern Asia, the other stepping into a meeting room in Europe. For us, Tina's behaviors may appear strange and exotic. Confronted with such behaviors, we might be shocked, revolted, mesmerized, fascinated. We may wonder what Tina is like as a person and whether she holds the same values as does Sandra. Do individuals like Tina value the same things as we do, are they motivated by the same things that makes us tick, do they think and feel about all sorts of daily activities in the same way we do? The "we" here includes you – the reader – and me, the author and observer of such fascinating rituals. Tina's behaviors seem different from ours, the cultural practices alien and hard to understand, making it more than plausible to assume that people like her have very different values and personalities from those of Sandra and our friends and colleagues back home.

In these descriptions, it is easy to focus on the specific behaviors that are richly colored through local customs and traditions. You may wonder about the meaning of Tina's holding a braided leather whip with an elaborately carved snake head. Or what Sandra's memories attached to the teacup are. My quest is to move to a different level of analysis, zooming out from

specifics to detect some general patterns of human personality, searching for more or less stable predispositions that describe people across situations and for psychological processes that form the core of who we are as individuals. On this journey we may find that Tina and Sandra are actually more similar than not, even though their behavior at first glance seems so radically different.

In this book, I focus on personality traits and values. There are a number of different psychological processes I could focus on when trying to describe individuals, so I had to make choices. I define these terms more properly later, but right now it suffices to say that personality traits refer to habitual behavioral tendencies that people manifest in different situations, whereas values are goals that people find desirable and use as guides for their behavior across different situations. I use psychological research on traits and values as snapshots to glean a picture of the underlying structure of human personality. To visualize this process, let's use cars as a metaphor. Cars vary widely in colors, design, and build: some go fast; others are slow. But rather than focusing on those external features, I want to explore the differences in how they move around. In other words, what is happening under the hood? To do that we raise the hood and examine the engines that make different cars move.

Peeking under the hood of a person and examining the engines of personality, we may also wonder why people in one place of the world hold different values and show different personality traits than people in another part of the world. What motivates both Tina and Sandra to behave the way they do? You may even wonder why humans have personality at all. Why do we show such differences in our personality? Why do we value different things? Would it not make sense for us to all want the same things and behave in the same way?

The book is concerned with these and other questions about personality, values, and culture. In tackling these questions, I connect and bring together different literatures that have been used to describe individuals. There are equally rich research traditions that focus on personality traits and on values. If we want to understand what people are like and why they are behaving and acting the way they do, we need to look at both traits and values. My first question is how similar or different values and personality traits are from each other. As will become clear, even though they are studied by different research traditions that have thrived independently, traits and values are actually quite similar in many aspects. Therefore, my challenge is to bring them back together conceptually and discuss how they are related to each other.

To link values and personality traits, I must answer a second question. What are the underlying mechanisms that give rise to both values and personality traits in individuals and populations? I draw on a diverse literature in personality and social psychology research, evolutionary biology, genomics, cognitive science, and neuroscience to explore these mechanisms. Bringing these literatures together, I propose a model that can account for the similarity of values and personality traits as commonly studied in psychology. Many interesting insights have been found in recent studies investigating the role of genes, so I need to cover a lot of genetics along the way. Yet the story is even more complicated, which raises my third question. Are your values and personality traits primarily your own, or is part of who you are shaped by the complex social and cultural environment in which you live? We humans live in complex social and cultural worlds in very diverse climatic habitats around the world, which provide us not only with lots of options, opportunities, and resources but also many challenges, threats, and dangers. How does this rich tapestry influence brain processes, and how do genes regulate human psychological functions?

#### STUDYING PERSONALITY AROUND THE WORLD

I take a scientific approach to describing personality. My quest is to understand persons and what they are like in their environment. To that end I have gathered data from studies conducted in different parts of the world to tackle the questions of what people are like and what makes them similar and different. What kind of data are available for the science of the person? There are two methods that have been used frequently. First, researchers use systematic observations. This method is followed traditionally in the field of anthropology. Western-trained individuals observe locals in their daily behavior and report what they find interesting, striking, or theoretically relevant. However, as it may be immediately apparent, there are multiple problems with this approach; for example, can we observe all relevant behavior across multiple contexts, how do we interpret behavior like I described at the beginning of the chapter if it lies outside our personal experience, what do we pay attention to, and what do we consider worth recording? By basing our research only on our observations, we miss the personal meaning and interpretation that the protagonists give to their actions. Yet, these observations can be useful for contextualizing behavior, and so I draw on some of these studies later in this book.

A second approach is to ask people themselves what they are like as a person: this is the most popular approach taken by psychologists (Allik &

McCrae, 2004; Hofstede & McCrae, 2004; McCrae, Terracciano, & Personality Profiles of Cultures Project, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2012). The most common (because the most economical) way to ask these questions is to use standardized questionnaires. Study participants are asked to describe themselves in terms of short statements, called items, that researchers have devised based on previous research. The relevance or appropriateness of each statement to the individual is typically indicated by using a numeric scale (often called a Likert scale). For example, I will rate the item, “I am an outgoing person,” in terms of the extent it describes me well (7), somewhat (4), or not at all (1). I could also choose intermediate values (2, 3, 5, 6), depending on how well I feel the statement describes me.

Of course, as do all research methods, the use of questionnaires has problems, and those differ from the problems with the observational method used in anthropology. First, the statements need to make sense, be representative of typical behavior, and be of relevance to the individual and the context (the representativeness and relevance criteria in the cross-cultural bias literature that I describe in Chapter 7). For the individual to be able to answer these questions, he or she must proceed through multiple steps. First, in any specific situation, the person has to be aware of what he or she is doing. Are Tina and Sandra aware of what they are doing at the particular moment when we caught up with them? The relevant behavior, thoughts, motivations, or beliefs need to then be memorized (encoded in memory). Across various situations and occasions, various behaviors need to be encoded and integrated into some general category that helps the individual make sense of this general class of behaviors and associated thoughts and beliefs (a process called categorization and abstraction). Both Tina and Sandra need to be able to abstract and generalize their personality observations and reflections of important values and behavior across situations and form an impression of what they are like as individuals. What values are important for Tina? What traits does Sandra use to describe her actions on a day-to-day basis? Later on, when confronted with the questionnaire by the researcher, a person has to perceive a fit between the question and some of these memorized events or abstract categories about the self (what are my important values, what are my characteristic traits?). This requires recognizing the relevance of these memories and self-categories, remembering relevant information, and choosing the subjectively appropriate answer on a scale from 1 to 5 or 1 to 7. And of course, a person needs to be motivated to engage with the questions posed by the researcher. Have a look at Figure 1.1 for a schematic description of the multiple steps involved in the overall process. In addition, much of personal description is driven by

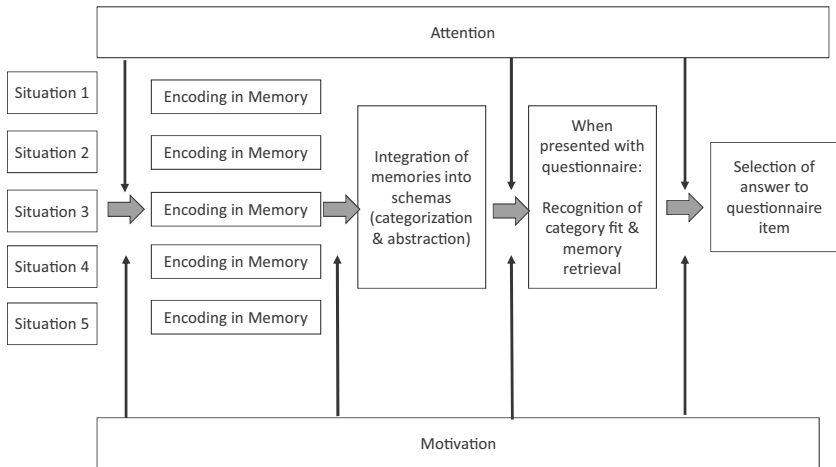


FIGURE 1.1 A schematic model showing important steps necessary to respond to personality and value questionnaires.

culturally idiosyncratic terms and phrases. I touch repeatedly on these tricky issues of language; attention to and encoding of relevant situations, behaviors, thoughts, and beliefs; and tendencies to recall them when asked to respond to survey items. When discussing personality traits and values, it is important to keep in mind how the data are gathered and the complex process that leads to these statistics that I describe and analyze throughout the book.

#### AN EAGLE'S-EYE VIEW ACROSS MULTIPLE LITERATURES AND ACROSS CULTURES

To bring values and personality traits together, we need to browse widely in diverse research literatures. Personality researchers have described individuals in terms of their basic behavioral dispositions, drawing not only on neuroscience, genetics, and comparative biology but also on social-cognitive theories. More recently, researchers have started to develop computational network models. Social psychologists have focused on values, building on work in sociology and anthropology. Each of these literatures is rich, multifaceted, and contradictory. Yet, all of them deal with the individual and how people think and feel about themselves. Only recently have researchers made concerted efforts to bring these diverse literatures together in the study of personality. The research on values still stands largely distinct from that body of research, and this book's aim is to integrate values into these emerging models of human personality. In the first half

of the book, I present the evidence for the similarity between values and traits and provide a theoretical integration. Specifically, I bring together two different theoretical approaches: research in the tradition of the Big Five personality traits and social psychological research on values that builds on work by Milton Rokeach and Shalom Schwartz.

Turning to cultural differences, there is a large literature on culture and personality, and an even richer literature on culture and values. A casual scan of the literature suggests a relatively coherent picture. The broad consensus is that the same personality and value models apply globally, with different traits or values being more or less important in some cultures compared to others. Yet, there are empirical irregularities, niggles around the edges, and misfits, which are often glanced at and then ignored for the sake of simplicity. Hence, we need a broad view – like a bird hovering over a diverse literature. But the eyes need to be those of an eagle, eager to spot those inconsistencies and contradictions that do matter for building an integrative model of the human person. In this book, I argue that cultural differences are actually indicative of (a) a larger problem in the field's search for a simplistic model that fits all, (b) but attending to these inconsistencies is of great importance to understanding people in a global perspective, and therefore (c) attending to some of these problems is likely to yield theoretically rich new insights into the psychology of human personality. In bringing these different approaches together and drawing attention to some of the empirical inconsistencies across cultures, we will encounter a few apparent paradoxes and seemingly contradictory findings. I try to resolve these in later chapters, so I need to ask for some patience as we move through the book.

### Theoretical Lumpers versus Splitters

Scientific endeavors have two broad tendencies. One is to make finer and finer distinctions between specific phenomena. The other one is to zoom out and look at a broader range of phenomena, focusing on similarities across them and general organizing principles. Some people use terms like “splitters” versus “lumpers” to describe these two broad tendencies. My approach in this book is clearly aligned with the latter. My focus is on providing a broad picture that identifies communalities that can help us make sense of human individuality across different contexts. Given the current tendencies in psychology to make finer and finer distinctions in personality and the trends in social psychology to describe smaller and smaller aspects of human psychology, we need a broad framework to examine how these various characteristics may relate to each other. The overarching framework

that helps me bring these fields together is an evolutionary perspective on culture and human behavior.

When they hear the word “evolution,” most people think of Darwin and of biological evolution powered by natural selection. This theory is well established, and its explanation of how different species came into existence and continue to change is well accepted. There is little controversy surrounding this explanation. Many people also accept that different individuals carry different sets of genes that make them unique. Yet, the application of evolutionary principles to explaining differences between groups of people might make some people uncomfortable. After all, history reminds us of the dangers of using scientifically flawed ideas of evolution to advance political ends to exclude and even exterminate supposedly inferior groups. It is important to use sound science and highlight ethical and practical implications.

#### EVOLUTION AS A GENERAL FRAMEWORK

The term “evolution” comes from the Latin *evolvere* and can be translated as “unrolling.” Its broad meaning indicates a gradual development of something, typically denoting a change from a simpler form to a more complex form. The general use of the term “evolution” as indicating an unfolding or gradual development might be more acceptable to many individuals; after all, change is all around us, and even we change over the course of our individual lives. In the context of this book, I use the term “evolution” in this broad sense. Any gradual change can be driven by different processes and mechanisms. Darwin’s (1859) theory focused on biological evolution, which is a specific and precise application and extension of the term to describe the change in biological species. Social systems also evolve over time, and these changes affect individuals. As with the evolution of biological species, it is possible to study changes in social systems scientifically. These evolutionary changes at the level of social systems are likely to be driven by a diverse set of variables and processes. This so-called cultural evolution shows some similarities to biological evolution, but also differs in crucial details.

Evolutionary approaches have been quite successful in providing some insights into patterns of behaviors, in particular mate selection, aggression, and cooperation. What is important here is that these approaches have focused on specific and relatively isolated behaviors. For example, researchers in economics and biology often study specific cooperation behaviors using simple games in which people have to interact with random strangers in the laboratory and need to make some financial decisions.



Or, researchers investigate changes in cultural objects such as spear tips or vases – behavioral expressions manifested in particular artifacts that can be examined in the archaeological record. It is relatively easy to study processes that lead to changes in specific behaviors such as decisions to cooperate or not or to make spear tips one way or another. There is much less work on understanding the psychological processes that might give rise to a more complex arrangement of traits and values. Some evolutionary psychologists have even dismissed attempts to study these phenomena of social change as inconsequential from a (biological) evolution perspective (Tooby & Cosmides, 1995). I disagree. As you will see in the following chapters, there are systematic patterns in the organization and variation of personality traits and values across individuals and communities. If these patterns are not random, they should be amenable to scientific analysis and explanation. A broad evolutionary framework is arguably the best-suited scientific tool for such purposes.

#### A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

In this book, I deal with complex processes by linking various literatures to present a new approach to personality and value differences within and across cultures. Many of the studies use complex statistics and advanced mathematical models, and I distill and present their main ideas without complex equations or models. At key points, I highlight how the traits and values of our main protagonists at the beginning of this chapter can be understood from different theoretical perspectives. To prepare us for the road ahead, in Chapter 2, I outline some basic principles of evolution and how biological and cultural evolution are both similar and different. I briefly describe key terms and processes from evolutionary biology and psychology, behavioral ecology, and genetics. Researchers interested in personality traits and values are often trained in social sciences and might not be very familiar with some of these ideas coming from biology. Importantly, I introduce recent ideas of how biology and culture interact with each other through so-called gene-culture coevolution. In Chapter 3, I introduce the main ingredients of this book: personality traits and values as currently studied in psychology. Personality is a broad concept that includes many facets and aspects of what a person is like. It encompasses relative stable differences between people in their emotions, beliefs, values, goals; some researchers even include mental abilities as part of personality. It is challenging to examine all these areas across cultures simultaneously because many of these aspects have been studied infrequently and in isolation from

each other, while using very diverse methods that make integration difficult. Values and personality traits (in the sense of more narrowly defined dispositional consistencies in behaviors across situations) have been researched largely independently, but there are interesting and important synergies that allow me to integrate them. I am confident that other researchers will tackle other aspects of personality and start developing a more holistic global science of personality in due course. Narrowing the scope, in Chapter 3, I present a brief history of two prototypical approaches to personality trait and value research in Western psychology. I discuss the Big Five personality trait model and the Schwartz value theory, which have been the dominant approaches in personality and social psychology, respectively. This is the core material that I use for describing personality in this book.

In Chapter 4, I examine similarities between the Big Five personality trait model and the Schwartz value theory. Values and traits are strongly influenced by the same historical roots, but have thrived in very different research traditions and literatures, with little overlap or joint discussion. My main argument in Chapter 4 is that values and traits are much more similar than many people believe. Both are organized in a similar two-dimensional structure. The organization of traits in such a two-dimensional structure might be surprising to some researchers, because interrelations between traits have been obscured by the common use of factor analysis (a statistical technique to reduce complex sets of relationships to a small number of underlying factors, which are assumed to be independent).

What might account for this great similarity of traits and values? Explaining the underlying psychological mechanics will take a few intermediate steps. In Chapter 5, I take an indirect route by examining the relative importance of both genes and culture for traits and values. A number of theoretical models have predicted that traits are more strongly influenced by genes, whereas values are more strongly shaped by culture. As I review in Chapter 5, the evidence instead suggests that both traits and values are strongly influenced by genes, whereas culture plays a much smaller role for both traits and values. In other words, overall we are more alike than different. This finding might seem surprising and unexpected. In Chapter 6, I therefore review several theoretical accounts that try to explain how personality traits (in particular) arise, drawing on recent advances in biological and neuroscience models to explain the common organization of values and personality traits. I use these insights to present a new framework that can explain the two-dimensional structure that I presented in Chapter 4.

In Chapters 4–6, I focus on genetic and biologically driven predispositional approaches. But the local environment with all its social, economic,