Medical Xpress

Turns out there's no 'type' in Type A personality

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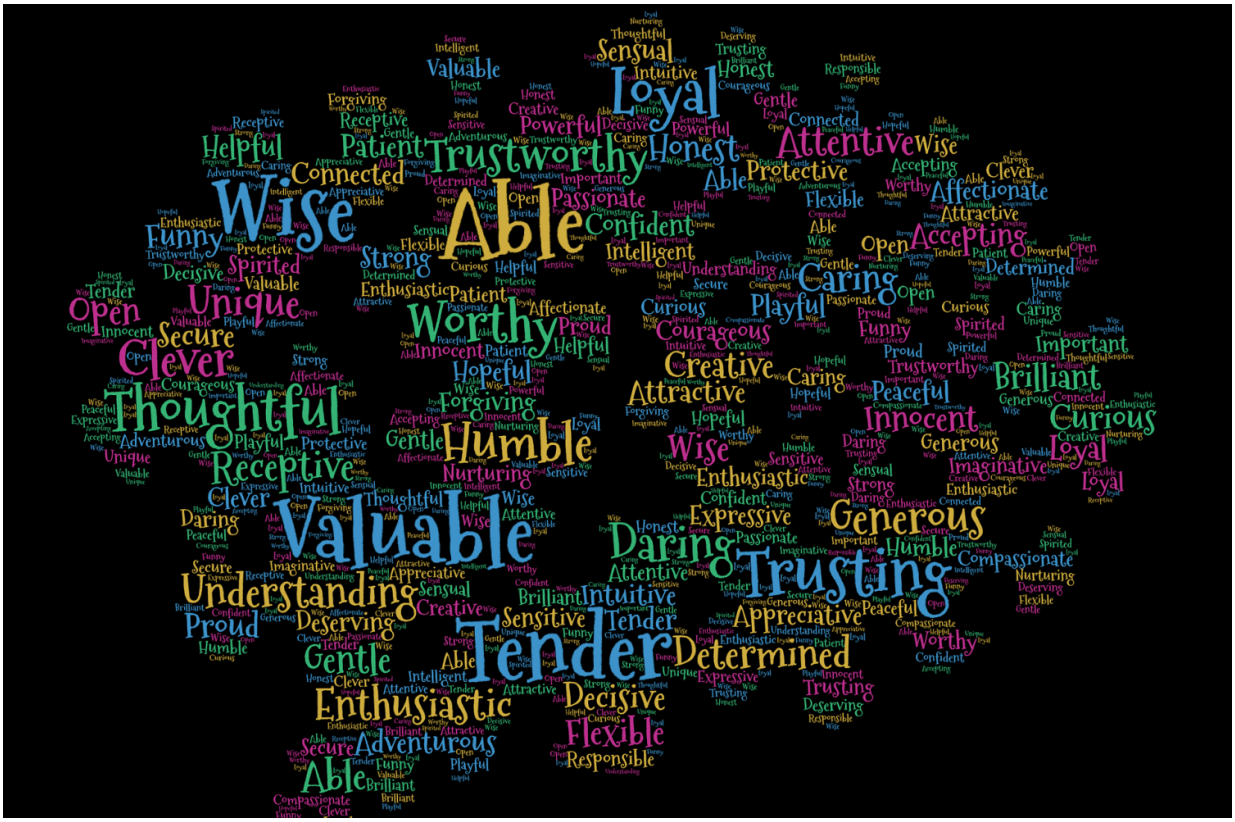

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You know the type. Hard-driving, competitive, impatient. They call it Type A.

But new University of Toronto research suggests that this common pop-psychology concept is really not a type at all.

"For a long time, Type A has been one of the most familiar personality traits, but it turns out there's no evidence for the 'type' in it," says Michael Wilmot, a postdoctoral researcher at U of T Scarborough's department of management.

Still, he says there's a lot to be learned from the research that led to this term. Type A is often used to describe impatient perfectionists who are obsessed with their work. The trait was first described in the 1950s by a pair of cardiologists who were looking for risk factors for heart disease. It resulted in decades of research and scholarly debate about whether or not Type A was a source of heart disease. Subsequent research found that only a few characteristics associated with Type A (hard-driving, competitiveness and hostility) were risk factors.

What eventually emerged was that Type A is better described as a "multidimensional syndrome" – a cluster of traits rather than an actual typology. But then a landmark 1989 study argued that Type A is a naturally occurring type – people are either Type A or Type B. This finding supported the prevailing view in popular culture, but as Wilmot points out, that study was never replicated.

"To determine questions about typology, researchers use a set of procedures called taxometric methods," says Wilmot (pictured left). One of his co-authors, Nick Haslam, a professor of psychology at the University of Melbourne, recently wrote a paper urging researchers to re-examine older studies that used taxometric methods. "He found that many that reported typological evidence were likely false-positives due to their use of now outdated methods."

For this research, published in the *Journal of Personality and Social*

Psychology, Wilmot and his collaborators wanted to revisit this typology claim using modern taxometric methods across two studies that included more than 4,500 participants.

Aside from not being able to replicate the original finding, their results suggest that Type A behaviour is better described as a group of distinct personality traits. These traits, which include hard-driving/competitiveness, speed and impatience, as well challenges with time pressure, all exist along spectrums that can be found in individuals at higher or lower levels, but none as either/or categories.

"Type A really is a misnomer, but it's such a popular one," says Wilmot, whose research with U of T associate professor Brian Connelly looks at how organizations use personality measures to solve workplace challenges.

"The thing about personality types is that they're very interesting to talk about and they have been an object of public fascination for ages. But with modern, more robust research methods, most of these older typological claims are turning out to be spurious."

As for next steps, Wilmot plans to unpack individual traits like hard-driving competitiveness and achievement striving, two traits that seem to be strong predictors of academic success. They also appear to be related to job satisfaction and positive emotions on the job, he adds. By contrast, traits like speed and impatience seem to be associated with health problems, sleep issues, low job satisfaction and greater amounts of work strain.

Wilmot says by exploring these individual traits for what they truly are will go a long way in helping people navigate challenges at work and in life generally. "If you study these traits separately, and not in the context of one specific personality type, then you can arrive at something

meaningful that can help people."

More information: Michael P. Wilmot et al. Direct and conceptual replications of the taxometric analysis of type a behavior., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2018). DOI: 10.1037/pspp0000195

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