Personalities are like traditions—unique patterns of behaviour that build over a lifetime of improvisation

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The question of whether personality is the result of nature or nurture has plagued researchers – and the general public – for decades. What we do

know is that we are all unique, each with a distinctive pattern of speech, gesture, movement and thought. And when it comes to our personality, our past thoughts and actions influence our future thoughts and actions. In short, our personalities are traditions. If this is the case, then, can we change them? The answer is yes, but the process might be difficult.

Our personalities, like most ways in our minds vary, are a complex mix of nature and nurture. Nature certainly matters: studies of twins, separated from birth, show that our genes can shape our lives. Most tellingly, identical twins raised separately have more similar personalities than fraternal twins, who share only half their genes. But nurture matters too: identical twins raised separately – or indeed raised together – are very different people. Nature and nurture can, of course, interact in complex ways: for example, a child naturally interested in music (nature) may be more likely to be given, or persist with, music lessons (part of nurture). Similarly, an initially shy or friendly child will shape how people treat them: nature will, again, shape nurture.

It is remarkable just how different we all are. Meeting a colleague recently after 20 years, I had a strange and powerful sense of familiarity and recognition. But I had entirely forgotten the subtly distinctive patterns of intonation, the quizzical smile, the leaning of the head to one side. Conversation began to break out, just as it always had. We were, it seemed, the same people as before, picking up as if after a couple of days, not a couple of decades.

Such experiences remind us that it is the details that makes each person we encounter "feel" distinctive. Yet we tend to think of ourselves, and our personalities, in far more general terms: people are gregarious or quiet; relaxed or anxious; generous or selfish; brave or timid. We may try to pin down such traits more precisely, using any of the vast array of personality tests developed over more than a century of "psychometric" research – for example, the widely used OCEAN model, with its scales

for Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism.

But these abstract descriptions don't seem to match up with our everyday experience of the uniqueness of other people. After all, an impersonator can instantly conjure up a celebrity or politician by a distinctive phrase, tone of voice or facial expression. But an abstract list of personality traits would surely bring no one in particular to mind.

I think our intuition that it is details, not generalities, that make each of us special is on precisely the right track. To see how this might be the case, consider the analogy of tradition – whether in cooking, music, art or any other aspect of life. We know, within perhaps less than a second, the difference between traditional jazz, Bach, disco or hip-hop. It is the particularities that strike us – specific combinations of notes, harmonies and instrumentation. Describing musical traditions in terms of abstract traits (fast versus slow; rhythmical versus fluid; dynamic versus serene) is possible, but not very helpful.

Musical, and other, traditions arise from the specific, not the general. Each new piece of music is a recombination and variation of snippets of previous pieces; each new dish is an amalgam of previous dishes; each new art work draws on the canon of prior art works, and so on. And the resulting traditions are rich, complex, contradictory, and with boundaries blurring into neighbouring traditions. Musicologists, food writers and art historians can, in retrospect, come up with insightful descriptions and helpful taxonomies. But, to switch for a moment to literature, if you want to know what "metaphysical poetry" is, no amount of learned discussion will substitute for hearing a few lines of Andrew Marvell or John Donne.

I suggest that people are traditions, too: traditions of thoughts, actions and reactions, patterns of movements, and tone of voice. Each new

thought and action is a recombination and variation of what we have thought and done before – and, to an extent, borrowing from what we have observed others say and do. Over a lifetime, our patterns of thoughts and behaviour become entrenched – it is our unique history, our unique habits and patterns, that make us special.

If this is right, how should we answer the question: what sort of person am I? This is an impossible question, like defining impressionism, flamenco or nouvelle cuisine. We know others, and ourselves, from experiencing examples, not contemplating abstractions.

So, from this viewpoint, our personalities are stable, not because we have unchanging "deep" traits (extrovert, anxious, risk-taker, and so on), but because we draw on, and often entrench, our own unique "history" of thoughts and action. We are like jazz musicians – our distinctive style is built up, snippet by snippet, layer by layer, through a lifetime of improvisation.

Can you change?

Changing aspects of our personalities (if we want to) will, most likely, be slow and difficult. But, like jazz musicians learning their craft, we can change, improve and gradually – and with effort – substitute new habits of thought for old. Indeed, this is the strategy of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, which asks people to record, challenge and actively modify their behaviours and thoughts.

In addressing, for example, a fear of snakes, no amount of willpower is likely to be effective, still less a general injunction to "be braver" or "pull ourselves together". What does work is helping develop new reactions to – and thoughts about – snakes, to overwrite the old, unhelpful reactions and thoughts, for example, by gradual exposure to pictures of snakes, rubber snakes and, ultimately, snakes themselves, in

safe conditions.

A recent study indicated that the same is true for more everyday personality traits. The authors found that the degree of wanting or intending to be more outgoing, for example, did not predict increased extroversion over time. But if people set goals (for example by prepare topics of conversation, saying hello to a stranger and so on), it turns out that self-reported personality change can be predicted by success in achieving these goals. If you want to change some aspect of your personality, then, you need to practice new behaviours and thoughts.

So, as with any tradition, each of us can adjust and evolve – and while we are shaped by our past, we are also authors of our future. But tradition runs deep and each of us has our own patterns of thought, speech, gesture and movement that makes us unique – immediately recognisable even when decades have passed. Rather than being troubled by our quirks and idiosyncrasies as "imperfections" from our ideal self, perhaps we should simply rejoice in our own uniqueness, and humanity's limitless variety.

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