Formal Approaches to Personality

Who we are, what we think, and how we feel in the situations we experience make up our personalities. Personality is complicated; there are many ways to examine it, both formally and informally. Several formal theories addressing the concept of personality including the following:

**Psychoanalytic Theory**
Pioneered by Sigmund Freud, psychoanalytic theory examines the important role the unconscious mind has on shaping who a person is and how he behaves. Freud felt that an individual's personality, or "psyche" is made up of three motivational drives: the id, the ego, and the superego. He believed the id, part of the unconscious mind, is devoted to obtaining pleasure and relieving tension. The superego, like the id, is an unconscious part of the mind. The superego, however, serves as a person's "conscience" or sense of right and wrong. The id determines what our unconscious "wants" to do, and the superego identifies what we "should" do. The third structure, the ego, is a conscious part of the mind. The ego serves as a "mediator" between the id and superego. The ego tries to meet the demands of the pleasure-seeking id, but in a socially acceptable way, so the moral-driven superego will not be compromised. For more information, AllPsych Online describes Freud's "Structural Model," including the id, superego, and ego (O). Although Freud's theories have been criticized, his idea regarding the influence of the unconscious mind is widely accepted. While a number of other researchers also applied their own ideas regarding to psychoanalytic theory, please note the above information is most specific to the Freudian model.

**Behaviorist Theory**
Strict behaviorists, uncommonly found today, believe only those behaviors that are measurable are appropriate to research. Subjective thoughts and motivations are not measurable and therefore not a part of behavioral research. The behaviorist theory emphasizes that all behavior is learned through the processes of environmentally-based reward and punishment. A behavior will be repeated if it is rewarded or if it is not punished. Similarly, a punished behavior will not be repeated. A student, for instance, will continue to be late for class if the tardiness does not affect her grade. Her reward may be sleeping in or moving at a slower, more comfortable pace. She may stop being tardy, however, if she is reprimanded by the instructor or if her grade suffers as a result of her behavior.

John B. Watson, one of the early behaviorists, was highly influenced by the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov. John Watson's experiments with "Little Albert" have been widely cited. How much of his research is true and how well his research has been interpreted, however, is debatable. A video regarding Watson and his "Little Albert" studies is available via YouTube (R).

Albert Bandura, another behaviorist, is known for his experiments with children and a "bobo" doll. Watch a Youtube video clip showing how Bandura tried to illustrate the power of modeling as a shaper of behavior (R).

B.F. Skinner, known for his operant conditioning work, was a more contemporary behaviorist who tried to apply his laboratory techniques to society. He was particularly known for getting
pigeons to learn to peck on a lever in order to retrieve a reward of food. To learn more about Skinner and how pigeons have been taught behavior based on reward, view a video clip posted on YouTube (O).

Although most therapists do not subscribe to behaviorism as the only way to impact behavior, they may certainly feel shaping behavior can be useful. "Dr. Phil," a current talk show host, often provides advice based on reward and punishment i.e. an individual will repeat behavior if he or she is rewarded for doing so (O).

Developmental Theory
According to this view, people are the way they are based upon what they experience as they age and develop. Erik Erikson was a famous developmental psychologist who believed that every human being went through a series of eight psychological conflicts. These conflicts, Erikson argued, occur in a specific order from infancy into advanced age. An individual's ability or inability to solve one conflict will have an effect upon how he handles the subsequent conflicts. For example, Erikson argued that the conflict infants must resolve is trust versus mistrust. In this stage, if an infant's needs go unmet, he may not learn to trust himself or others. This unresolved conflict can affect the outcomes of other developmental stages. Take a look at Erikson's Developmental Stages (R), as presented by a professor at Cortland University. While you will not be expected to memorize all of the developmental stages, you will be expected to understand Erikson's theory is age- and developmentally-based.

Humanistic Theory
Humanistic psychologists, such as Carl Rogers (O) and Abraham Maslow (O), view individuals in an optimistic light. Humanists believe people are basically good, attempting to accomplish as much as possible to become successful human beings throughout life. Humanists believe in the relevance of values and morals in explaining the make-up of a person.

Carl Rogers is widely-known for his belief in client-centered therapy (O--from findcounseling.com), where the patient is regarded in a sympathetic manner with "unconditional positive regard."

Abraham Maslow felt a person's functions were based upon how well a series of needs were met. He structured these needs into a hierarchy--needs at the bottom of this hierarchy must be met before those at the top could be fulfilled. The hierarchy of needs (R, from Mindtools.com), from bottom to top, is made up of physiological needs (food, water, etc.), safety needs (to be free from harm, to have a roof over one's head), needs of love and belonging, self-esteem needs and, lastly, the optimal need for self-actualization (O).

Other approaches of defining personality include social-cognitive, evolutionary, and biological models. While exploring any one model can be helpful to understanding it, most health professionals recognize the importance contributions from all models have made to personality research.