Formal Approaches to Personality

A PowerPoint presentation (no narration) containing much of this information is available:
http://facweb.northseattle.edu/troot/HEA150/slides/personality.ppt
http://facweb.northseattle.edu/troot/HEA150/slides/personality.pdf

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 those listed here.

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.

Learning and Behavioral Theories

In behavioral and learning approaches to personality, a person behaves in certain ways based on what has been learned during life. According to the behavior and learning approach, an individual can also learn behavior through observation. An extreme behaviorist approach is uncommon today, but in this instance the way a person is (personality) should only be gauged by behavior, which is measurable, while thoughts and motivations are not. The behavior and learning theory emphasizes that 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 unpunished. For instance, a person who is rewarded for helping others will be more likely to repeat that helping behavior. Or, in another example, a student will continue to be late for class if the tardiness does not affect the person's grade. The reward may be sleeping in or moving at a slower, more comfortable pace. With respect to punishment, a person will be less likely to repeat a behavior that is punished or does not receive a reward. For example, a person who experiences a burn after touching a hot stove will learn to be afraid or cautious of stoves in the future. Or, an individual who does not perceive any reward from regular physical activity will be less likely to repeat that behavior.

Ivan Pavlov was a famous physiologist who was responsible for identifying the concept of classical conditioning. In classical conditioning, a person’s response to a specific stimulus can be trained to become a response to a different stimulus. Pavlov, while studying the digestive system of dogs, realized that a dog will salivate when food is presented. Pavlov paired the food with a sound. With time, the dogs began to salivate after hearing just the sound. For a humorous example of classical conditioning, watch a ~1-minute video segment from the old television show, “The Office” (R).
http://vimeo.com/35754924

John B. Watson was highly influenced by Pavlov. 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). After viewing the video, think about how punishment shaped behavior in this instance.
Albert Bandura, another psychologist, is known for his experiments with children and a “bobo” doll. Through this work he tried to show the effect modeling can have on a person’s learning and behavior. Watch a YouTube video clip showing Bandura’s experiment and explanation of the power modeling has on behavior (R).
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xt0ucxOrPQE

B.F. Skinner was a psychologist known for his work with operant conditioning. According to operant conditioning theory, a behavior will be more likely to repeat if it is rewarded. Skinner 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 (R).

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 and Abraham Maslow, 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, or person-centered therapy, where the patient is regarded in a sympathetic manner with "unconditional positive regard."

Abraham Maslow felt a person's motivations 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. This hierarchy of needs, from bottom to top, includes physiological needs (food, water, air, etc.), safety needs (to be free from harm, to have a roof over one's head), needs for love and belonging, self-esteem needs, and, lastly, the optimal need for self-actualization.

For more information in understanding Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, travel to one of the two below websites (R):

Khan Academy, 3-minute lecture
https://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/mcat/behavior/theories-personality/v/maslow-hierarchy-of-needs

Hierarchy of Needs (Kendra Cherry, verywell.com)
There are other formalized theories and approaches to defining personality, including 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.