# the normal personality

a new way of thinking about people

Steven Reiss

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## THE NORMAL PERSONALITY

In *The Normal Personality*, Steven Reiss argues that human beings are naturally intolerant of people who express values significantly different from their own. Because of this intolerance, psychologists and psychiatrists sometimes confuse individuality with abnormality and thus overdiagnose disorders. Reiss shows how normal motives – not anxiety or traumatic childhood experiences – underlie many personality and relationship problems, such as divorce, infidelity, combativeness, workaholism, loneliness, authoritarianism, weak leadership style, perfectionism, underachievement, arrogance, extravagance, stuffed shirt, disloyalty, disorganization, and overanxiety. Calling for greater understanding and tolerance of all kinds of personalities, Reiss applies his theory of motivation to leadership, human development, relationships, and counseling.

Steven Reiss was educated at Dartmouth College, Yale University, Harvard University, and the Massachusetts General Hospital. He has published scientific and clinical studies on the co-occurrence of intellectual disabilities and mental illness. His work has been recognized with five national awards, two for scientific research, two for national impact on clinical services, and one for national leadership, and he has received two certificates of recognition for volunteer work. In 1985, Professor Reiss and then–graduate student Richard J. McNally published the construct of anxiety sensitivity as an early risk factor for Panic Disorder. The anxiety sensitivity index has been translated into more than thirty-five languages and is used to help diagnose many thousands of patients throughout the world. Professor Reiss's theory of motivation is an expansion of the anxiety sensitivity construct to motives other than anxiety.

# The Normal Personality

## A NEW WAY OF THINKING ABOUT PEOPLE

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*Dedicated to my family, Maggi, Michael, and Ben*

*(and in memory of our dog, Rusty)*

I call [a] mean in relation to us that which is neither excessive nor deficient, and this is *not* one and the same for all.

– Aristotle
The quotation is from the Doctrine of the Mean, Book II, *Nichomachean Ethics.*

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# Overview

Values, not unconscious psychodynamics, drive the human psyche.

– theme of this book

I advocate a new way of thinking about people called *motivation analysis*. Psychodynamic counselors and therapists ask, "What happened when this individual was a toddler? Deep down, how does this person feel about his/her parents?" These theorists explain adult personality traits in terms of early childhood experiences, anxiety, and defense; they regard many of life's common problems as mild forms of mental illness. In contrast, motivation analysts ask, "What are the individual's life goals and intrinsically held values? What is he or she trying to accomplish with this or that behavior? Do the individual's current work situation and relationships fulfill or frustrate his or her desires and values?" Motivation analysts explain adult personality as habits people learn to satisfy their life motives, psychological needs, and intrinsically held values. Motivation analysts explain many personal troubles as the result of unmet or frustrated needs, possibly including a conflict of values between the individual and his/her current career, social life, relationships, or family life.

## The Abnormal Personality

Sigmund Freud (1963/1916) asserted three significant similarities between personality traits and symptoms of mental illnesses: (1) Both originate in childhood experiences; (2) both are manifestations of unconscious mental forces (called *psychodynamics*); and (3) both are motivated by anxiety or tension reduction. Based on these asserted similarities, psychodynamic theorists have used psychiatric terminology to describe the personality traits of ordinary people. When I was a student at Dartmouth College and Yale University, for example, nationally eminent psychodynamic theorists taught me that suspiciousness is a mild

form of paranoia; orderliness is a mild form of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder; unhappiness is a mild form of depression; divorce results from unconscious forces similar to those that cause neurosis; ulcers are caused by an intense need for people (dependency); and obesity is caused by an unconscious wish for self-destruction. Today, I know of no convincing scientific evidence to support any of these teachings (Dolan-Sewell, Krueger, & Shea, 2001; Kline, 1972).

Psychodynamic theorists have regarded personality as those behaviors we engage in that most resemble symptoms of mental illness. To appreciate the extent to which psychologists have derived personality traits from theories of mental illness, please compare the following two lists. On the left are the original ten traits assessed by the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI; Hathaway & McKinley, 1943). Notice the extent to which the MMPI personality traits read like a list of mental illnesses. On the right are examples of the "normal" personality traits discussed in this book. (The traits on the same line are not matched.)

| **Original MMPI** | **Reiss Motivation Profile** |
|---|---|
| Hypochondriasis | Brave/Cautious |
| Depression | Secure/Insecure |
| Hysteria | Self-reliant/Interdependent |
| Psychopathic deviate | Honorable/Expedient |
| Masculinity–femininity | Saver/Spender |
| Paranoia | Formal/Informal |
| Psychasthenia | Willful/Nondirective |
| Schizophrenia | Organized/Spontaneous |
| Hypomania | Athletic/Physically lazy |
| Social introversion | Sociable/Introvert |

Even a cursory inspection of these two lists shows the extent to which personality assessments of ordinary (normal) people have been focused on symptoms of abnormality. Although the MMPI has been updated (Butcher et al., 1989), it remains focused on clinical assessment and constructs similar to those put forth in the original version.

Many psychologists still regard personality and mental illness as closely connected constructs. The Society for Personality Assessment (SPA), for example, is a national organization of about four thousand clinical and social psychologists. The SPA is largely concerned with clinical assessment, as if personality assessment and clinical diagnosis were as closely related as Freud had held. According to Claridge and Davis (2003), for example, it is "self-evident" that "psychological disorders are intimately connected to personality" (p. 1).

## Psychopathology of Everyday Life

Freud (1963/1916) regarded many common personal troubles – such as divorce, underachievement, unhappiness, and work–life imbalance – as mild forms of mental illness. He put forth the hypothesis of "psychopathology of everyday life." This hypothesis implies a fine line between normality and abnormality; psychodynamic theory encourages a broad definition of "disorder." Here is a partial list of what psychiatrist Norman Cameron (1963), who authored an influential psychiatry textbook, considered to be expressions of "psychopathology of everyday life": A businessperson who flies into a rage when his or her judgment is questioned; a man who feels misunderstood and the target of unjust criticism; people who live for approval and praise; a vague, perplexed woman who is preoccupied with the meaning of life; mystical experience; and a wealthy individual who wants even more wealth. Cameron presented no scientific evidence that any of these personal troubles are actually connected to mental illnesses such as Schizophrenia, Panic Disorder, or Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder.

When Freudians blurred the distinction between what is normal versus abnormal, estimates of the prevalence of psychopathology soared. Reading a newspaper in 2004, for example, I learned that a sports counselor had diagnosed 15 percent of a sample of NCAA athletes as clinically depressed (The Plain Dealer, 2006). I assessed 150 NCAA athletes, only a few of whom seemed to be clinically depressed. Most showed behavior inconsistent with depression such as cheerfulness, alertness, and pep. I suspect that the sports counselor confused "unhappiness" with clinical depression. Nobody would be surprised to learn that 15 percent of NCAA athletes are unhappy, but diagnosing them as mentally ill goes too far.

The hypothesis of psychopathology of everyday life remains influential. Freud may be dead in the halls of the United States' leading psychology departments, but he is still a significant force in marital counseling, personal counseling, and psychotherapy. Today many counselors try to understand their clients' personal troubles and personality using constructs developed to study mental illnesses. They believe that dark, unconscious mental forces that originated during childhood cause personality traits, personal troubles, and mental illnesses.

Although many psychodynamic experts regard personal troubles[1] as mild disorders, I think problems are a normal part of life. *I will make the case for the normality of personal troubles by showing the normality of the underlying motives.* I will show that many personal troubles are motivated by frustrated psychological needs, not by the Freudian constructs of anxiety or defense. When we learn what is normal, we will stop treating everything that goes wrong in life as a potential psychiatric disorder.

## The Normal Personality

I believe that *values, not unconscious psychodynamics, hold the keys for understanding the personal troubles of ordinary people.* People should stop blaming their troubles on their parents or on their unconscious mind; they should stop thinking of themselves as victims of their upbringing. Instead, people should learn how their unfulfilled desires, unexpressed values, and conflicts of values get them into trouble. With greater self-awareness, people can make more fulfilling choices that lead to more meaningful lives and fewer troubles as the years pass.

Please don't get me wrong: I realize that mental illness exists, and I accept the reality of psychiatric disorders such as Schizophrenia and Panic Disorder. I take issue, however, with the psychodynamic thesis that such disorders have common causes with both personality development and personal troubles. *I am not rejecting the construct of mental illness; I am distinguishing between normal and abnormal.* I think it is normal to have troubles but abnormal to have a mental illness. *I think personality is about individuality, not abnormality.* I think Freud misunderstood motivation, and, therefore, he misunderstood what life is really about.

I reject the hypothesis of "psychopathology of everyday life." Freud held that personality traits are motivated by anxiety reduction; in contrast, I will show that personality traits are actually motivated by a variety of intrinsically held values. Psychodynamic theorists err when they claim, for example, that a dominant personality is motivated by anxiety reduction. Actually, the personality trait of dominance is motivated by stronger-than-average intrinsic valuations of competence, achievement, and will/influence. Psychodynamic theorists err when they claim that mystics are regressing to an oral stage of development to manage anxiety. Actually, mystics are seeking interdependence because they have stronger-than-average intrinsic valuations of oneness.

A number of previous psychologists have criticized psychodynamic theories of personality as being overly focused on abnormality. Abraham Maslow's (1954) humanistic psychology gave emphasis to the study of mental health. Today, positive psychology expresses a similar point (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). Previous theorists have yearned for a psychology of the normal personality. My aim in this book is to go far beyond constructs like "positive" and "normal" and put forth a detailed description of personality traits unrelated to mental illness.

Normal personality traits are habits people develop to satisfy their psychological needs (herein called *basic desires*). According to the results of research surveys of large groups (Reiss & Havercamp, 1998), sixteen basic desires drive the human psyche and potentially explain a wide range of human experiences, everything from relationships to values and culture. Everybody embraces all sixteen basic desires, but they prioritize them differently (Reiss, 2000a). How an individual

prioritizes the sixteeen basic desires, called a *Reiss Motivation Profile* (RMP), reveals his or her values and personality traits. If I know how an individual prioritizes and combines the sixteen basic desires, I can predict with significant validity the individual's personality traits, values, relationships, and behavior in real-life situations. The RMP provides a detailed description of human motivation, showing in unprecedented detail the connections among motives, values, and many normal personality traits.

Motivation analysis is based on peer-reviewed, scientifically valid surveys of what motivates people (Reiss & Havercamp, 1998). More than 25,000 people in North America and Europe have taken the RMP. Most people do not realize this, but throughout history no prior scholar addressed the issue of what makes human beings tick by asking large numbers of people. Every prior scholar identified universal motives based on philosophical or psychological speculation or on observations of animals; in contrast, I surveyed large numbers of ordinary people. The results of our studies showed sixteen basic desires of life. The sixteen basic desires have been cross-culturally validated in the United States, Canada, Germany, and Japan (Havercamp & Reiss, 2003; Reiss, 2000a; Reiss & Havercamp, 1998). People all over the world regardless of culture seem to be motivated by the same sixteen basic desires, although they may prioritize or satisfy them differently. In a series of peer-reviewed scientific publications, the sixteen basic desires have been validated and shown to predict meaningful behavior. (See Table 2.1 for summary of results and citations.) *Our empirical methods, I suspect, may be why our taxonomy of sixteen basic desires seems significantly more valid than prior taxonomies.*

Motivation analysis is outside the mainstream of current psychological thought. Psychologists have studied the unconscious mind, behavior, and cognitions, but not motivation. From my standpoint, the great psychologists of the past failed to provide viable accounts of motivation. Freud held that all human motivation reduces to sex and aggression, which is invalid. Freud actually explained personality traits as motivated by anxiety reduction, which also is invalid. Since behaviorists made animals very hungry prior to experiments, they never observed the significance of psychological needs. A man might be extremely ambitious, for example, but you would never notice it if the man were starving and had to direct all his energy to finding food. Cognitive psychologists have studied thought processes as if thinking were unmotivated and occurred simply because they were rational. I regard motivation as the last frontier of scientific psychology.

To the extent to which psychologists have studied motivation, moreover, they have focused on situational motives that have mostly short-term influences. In contrast, motivation analysis is focused on the study of enduring individual differences in life motives (also called *basic desires*). These are motives that satiate

only temporarily and, thus, influence our lives from adolescence through adulthood. I will make the case that life motives express intrinsically held values and drive personality development. I will show how normal personality traits can be ordered along continua of varying intensities of life motives. I will explain how personal troubles occur when we find ourselves in life circumstances, jobs, or relationships that frustrate our life motives and contradict our intrinsically held values. Many personal troubles can be avoided by smart living in which people choose situations where they can thrive and avoid those situations that frustrate their individual values and needs. In contrast, mental illnesses such as Schizophrenia and clinical depression arise from genetic or upbringing factors. The possibility of preventing mental illnesses is not discussed in this book.

## Overview

**CHAPTER 1. MY WIFE THINKS SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH ME.** This chapter provides an initial, easy-to-read example of the differences between motivation analysis and psychodynamics. What makes people organized versus disorganized? According to psychodynamic theory, how organized we are depends on how much we embrace authority versus rebel with anger (e.g., Fenichel, 1945; White & Watt, 1973). According to motivation analysis, how organized we are depends on how much we value structure. I will make the case that the degree of valuation of structure explains the details of organized and disorganized behavior significantly better than does psychodynamics.

**CHAPTER 2. THE SIXTEEN BASIC DESIRES.** This chapter summarizes the scientific research evidence for motivation analysis. Sixteen basic desires drive the human psyche and motivate normal behavior and personality traits. I identify these desires and compare my taxonomy of psychological needs to those previously proposed by William James, William McDougall, and Henry Murray. The reliability and validity of each of the sixteen basic desires is summarized. All human motives seem to reduce to combinations of these sixteen, except for certain biological processes that have no relevance to personality, such as homeostasis.

**CHAPTER 3. INTENSITY OF BASIC MOTIVATION.** This chapter shows the normal personality traits associated with strong- and weak-intensities of each of the sixteen basic desires. Everybody embraces all sixteen basic desires, but to different extents. *How an individual prioritizes the sixteen basic desires reveals his or her values and personality*. Personality traits are associated with strong- and weak-intensity basic desires; average-intensity basic desires do not cause personality traits. Strong-intensity honor, for example, leads to the personality trait of righteousness, whereas weak-intensity honor leads to the personality trait of expedience.

Righteousness and expedience are "opposite" traits because they represent approach/avoidance of the same goal (honor).

**CHAPTER 4. NORMAL PERSONALITY TYPES.** In this chapter, I compare motivational and psychodynamic explanations for seven personality types: Workaholic, Competitor, Humanitarian, Thinker, Romantic, Loner, and Ascetic. I show how these personality types can be considered as results of normal variations in how people prioritize the sixteen basic desires. They are motivated by conditions unrelated to psychodynamic anxiety reduction and unconscious mental forces.

**CHAPTER 5. OVERCOMING PERSONAL TROUBLES.** Readers will learn how job coaches and counselors use motivation analysis to help their clients resolve a wide range of personal problems. Many personal problems result from value conflicts, as when an employee holds values that are in conflict with the work itself, the firm's culture, or the supervisor's values. Common examples of value conflicts at work include the high-achievement individual working for a government agency with a laid-back culture; an independent individual working in a culture that rewards teamwork; a person with a strong competitive spirit working for a school that devalues competitiveness; and a creative individual working in a job that expects things to be done the same way every time. Each of these examples is a conflict of values, not a mild mental illness as mainstream psychologists have said.

**CHAPTER 6. SIX REASONS FOR ADOLESCENT UNDERACHIEVEMENT.** Readers will learn six common motivational reasons for scholastic underachievement. They are lack of curiosity, lack of ambition, fear of failure, looking for trouble, expedience, and spontaneity. The Reiss School Motivation Profile (RSMP) evaluates each of these reasons based on standardized test scores.

**CHAPTER 7. SELF-HUGGING AND PERSONAL BLIND SPOTS.** I will discuss self-hugging, which is a natural tendency to think that our values are best (produce the greatest happiness), not just for ourselves, but potentially for everyone. Self-hugging motivates us to confuse individuality with abnormality. *When people choose values opposite our own, we think something must be wrong with them.* Sociable people, for example, think that something must be wrong with loners – maybe they avoid socializing because they lack social skills or fear being disliked. Most sociable people never appreciate that many loners may lack social skills because they want to be alone (intrinsically value solitude) and have no use for such skills.

**CHAPTER 8. RELATIONSHIPS.** Readers will learn how motivation analysis explains relationships. We are a species motivated to assert our values over and over again.

Individuality is so great, however, that others (including parents, children, siblings, and spouse) may assert values different from or even opposite to our own. *We are an intolerant species*; we naturally separate from people whose values significantly differ from our own. We tend to fight repeatedly with parents or children who have values different from our own, and we tend to divorce partners whose values are significantly different from our own. We bond to people whose values are similar to our own, and we have a successful life when career and relationships express our values.

The Reiss Relationship Profile (RRP) is an assessment tool that evaluates the compatibilities and incompatibilities of any romantic relationship. The RRP shows matched versus mismatched basic desires and values. In this chapter, I show how satisfaction within a relationship arises from matched basic desires and how conflict arises from mismatched basic desires.

**CHAPTER 9. REINTERPRETATION OF MYERS-BRIGGS PERSONALITY TYPES.** The sixteen basic desires provide a basis for reinterpreting and broadening the results of the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator (MBTI). Although the MBTI was intended to assess individual preferences in collecting and processing information and in making decisions, the MBTI is really an assessment of a limited number of psychological needs and basic desires. The RMP assesses all of the personality traits assessed by the MBTI without using any Jungian constructs.

**CHAPTER 10. THE SIXTEEN PRINCIPLES OF MOTIVATION.** I summarize the theory of motivation analysis in terms of sixteen principles. Each principle is stated and briefly discussed. The sixteen principles provide a formal statement of the conceptual foundation of motivation analysis.

**APPENDIX A. DICTIONARY OF NORMAL PERSONALITY TRAITS.** This dictionary shows theoretically the specific motivational basis of the personality traits in a thesaurus. Although such detailed classifications are common in biology, chemistry, and physics, this is the first psychological effort to classify each and every personality trait in a manner that is fully testable empirically.

**APPENDIX B. REISS MOTIVATION PROFILE ESTIMATOR.** This questionnaire estimates the results readers might obtain were they to take the standardized Reiss Motivation Profile. The questionnaire shows which of the sixteen basic desires the reader places in high or low valuation.

**APPENDIX C. THE SIXTEEN BASIC DESIRES AT A GLANCE.** This concise chart is intended for use in seminars and classrooms.

# 1 My Wife Thinks Something Is Wrong with Me

We will compare psychodynamic versus motivational explanations of organized and disorganized personality traits. According to psychodynamic theory, these personality traits are determined by unconscious mental forces set in motion during early childhood. According to motivation analysis, personality traits are determined by intrinsically held values and life motives (variously called *basic desires or psychological needs*).

## A Disorganized Person

Even the dullest observers of human nature notice that I am disorganized. My office is a mess: My files are on the floor with papers falling out of them, and my wastebasket is overflowing with paper trash. My coat is thrown on a chair, and my hat is misplaced where even I cannot find it. Every winter I need a half dozen pairs of gloves because I keep losing them.

My wife, Maggi, cleans my office whenever I leave town on a business trip. Instead of returning home and exclaiming, "What a wonderful wife you are – you straightened and cleaned my office," I complain, "I can't find my academic papers on anxiety! What did you do with them? Please make my office the way it was when I left."

I hate following schedules and have a tendency to arrive for appointments at the last second. I was at least 30 years old when I first bought an appointment book. Despite this major concession to organizing values, I continue to rush to appointments at the last minute just as I had before I used appointment books. Although part of my schedule is now written in my appointment book, I often forget to look in the book.

Both my wife and work assistants have learned to remind me of important meetings an hour beforehand. I guess you could say I am surrounded by enablers in my disorganized lifestyle. The reason they remind me is because the previous

method – leaving notes in the morning – did not work. I read the notes but quickly forgot them after I moved on to something else.

Like other disorganized people, I hate plans. I believe people should learn how to adjust to whatever comes their way rather than lock themselves into a planned course of action. Before I had studied motivation, I had assumed that planners are the way they are because they lack the talent needed to respond effectively on the spur-of-the-moment. If only planners could be more spontaneous and creative, I figured, they would be like me and not make plans.

I hate planning so much that as a university professor I wrote few research grant applications. I figured that planning research destroys my creativity. What if I get an important idea after the grant is awarded? I would be locked into the plan of the grant and not be able to go where new thinking takes me.

I especially hate planning leisure activities. Our family vacations are decided at the last possible minute even though travel and lodging costs are less expensive when reservations are made in advance. I recall the time when my family and I packed up the car and pulled out of the driveway to go on our vacation. Michael and Ben, my two children, gritted their teeth and asked with obvious annoyance, "Dad, where are we going?" Since we were still two miles from the expressway intersection, which would force the decision, I replied, "We don't have to make the decision now. We still have a few minutes to think about it."

As a professor, I often fly around the country to give talks. Naturally, I almost never plan these trips. On one occasion I opened my invitation to speak after my plane to Philadelphia had taken off. I discovered that my talk was scheduled for Harrisburg, not Philadelphia. Oops! When I arrived in Philly, I rushed through the airport, rented a car, and drove the 140 miles to the Harrisburg hotel where I was scheduled to speak. I arrived at the podium two minutes before my talk was to begin. About 400 people were seated in the audience, and the sponsors of my talk were wondering nervously what had happened to me. I turned to them and quipped, "Guess I'm a minute or two early." I just had to point out that organized people worry needlessly.

I was about 40 when I first realized that many people consider details important, rather than annoyances. Many people told me details are important, but I thought they were just making excuses for being mired in trivia. I like to focus on the essence of a matter, or the so-called big picture.I had long thought that the big picture is so obvious it was no feather in one's cap to discern it.

When I was in elementary school, teachers told my parents I was brilliant but very sloppy. I figured it was terrific to be brilliant and that a little sloppiness shows I am a regular fellow. I had no idea why people wasted time with neatness. As a boy I worked on logical proofs to show that cleaning was unnecessary. I used to tell my mother, for example, that tomorrow the house will need straightening