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Noftle 2015

Me, Myself, and I

Growing up in Palo Alto I had a much different childhood than the majority of the United States. The people that I was exposed to mostly looked like me (white skin), and had similar political ideas (liberal). When news on world events did reach my ear it didn’t seem real because it never seemed to affect my life in Palo Alto, which was all I cared about at the time. I was fortunate to live in such a safe neighborhood with top public middle and high schools, and a supportive family. But looking back now through the lens of this class I can pin point a few major events that have contributed significantly to my personality today.

One event that characterized who I was throughout my childhood was the addition of braces to my face in the 3rd grade. Talking with my mom recently she said that in parent teacher conferences after they were put on, my teacher at the time mentioned that she was worried about me because I had “changed and become more withdrawn.” Even as a third grader I was extremely self-conscious of what I looked like, and getting two layers of giant metal wires on my teeth didn’t help the self-esteem. Most people get braces for a few years at most. I was blessed with having three different periods of braces, with my last period ending a few days before high school graduation.

The other major event is not so much an event but a circumstance of my environment. Since I can remember my dad has not had a formal job that has required him to leave the house for a period of time. When I was 1-4 years old he worked as a teacher, but other than that he’s just done some freelancing work for a local newspaper and written a few screenplays for fun. Likewise, for the majority of my middle and high school years my mother worked at home as an editor for a Stanford science magazine. For a while I thought this was a normal thing for parents to do, until I got old enough to realize that this simply does not happen in other families. My first thought was “why am I just learning at the age of 12 that most other parents actually leave the house to go to work?” My second thought was: “what effect has having both parents constantly at home had on my personality?” I argue that by having both parents around at all times I developed a predominantly anxious attachment style.

In adults there are four different styles of attachment; they are secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and fearful-avoidant. There is strong evidence that they develop in childhood from interactions with caregivers. From these interactions children form expectations constructed on how available and helpful their caregiver is. Parents that are not available or helpful often make children that reflect that behavior. They rarely desire close relationships, and when they are in a close relationship they pursue less intimacy. On the opposite side of that, parents that are available far too often produce children that seek high levels of approval, and have less positive views of themselves. I identify far more with the anxious attachment style because I am always trying to seek approval for my actions, whether it be by wearing cool clothes, or winning at games and sports, or trying to be funny, I want to be appreciated for my talents. I attribute this need for approval to being constantly worried about how I look to other people and what my actions are interpreted as. By achieving this approval, even for just a second, all of my effort is rewarded and the anxious thoughts vanish from my mind. I want to go back to the idea of winning at games and sports as a way of trying to please people because the amount of pleasure I gain from competing and winning is unbelievable. I just thought that I was naturally an extremely competitive person and just happened to be very good at most games. But now I realize that this urge to compete and win is just another way to gain approval from my peers.

The next topic of personality psych that can be used to explain who I am is the Behavior Inhibition and Activation Systems, or the BIS and BAS. These two systems are biologically based and deal primarily with responses to situations that involve either punishment (BIS) or reward (BAS). Unlike attachment styles there is not as much of an interaction between genes and environment in the forming of these, if any at all. However, I believe that getting braces in third grade had a strong negative consequence on me that I never really recovered from. From taking the Who Am I test at the beginning of the year I know that my score for the BIS is much bigger than for the BAS, aside from one subtype: reward responsiveness. These scores only affirmed what I knew about myself already: that I am an extremely cautious person who loves his comfort zone. My mom has tried her best to convince me to do things that push my boundaries, like transferring colleges to one that suits my interests more, or taking a year off from school and getting a job, but I was so afraid of leaving this comfortable space that I had settled into that I didn’t even consider it. Until I came to college I was so grounded in my ways of non-rule breaking because I was worried about what would happen if I was ‘caught.’ It was the mindset of Murphy’s Law: anything that can go wrong, will go wrong. Of course it never did, but that didn’t stop me from always thinking about what punishment I would be awarded if anything did go wrong. The BAS deals with sensitivity to reward and the drive to achieve goals. Although my score for reward responsiveness was relatively high, my score for goal-directed behavior was noticeably lower.

The final thing I want to talk about are goals and intrinsic motivation. For me these things are closely linked because they are both connected to fact that my dad went through a rough patch in his life right in the middle of my childhood. As I progressed through middle to high school and homework became more demanding, I knew that I would have to put more time and effort into it. But I had never had someone to not just teach me how to work hard, but to also show me how to work hard. This lack of strong male role model undeniably had a negative effect on my intrinsic motivation to work. Work wasn’t something that was ever tangible or emphasized growing up because I rarely heard talk of it in my house; it seemed more like an intangible concept. This is sort of an example of the price of privilege that I faced. This same price for privilege is what partially drives my goals: to be the parent that is a role model for hard work and dedication to a particular area. Before I keep going I do want to say that despite what I’m saying about him, I love my dad very much. There are some things that he went through that forced him to make work a lower priority that do not need to be mentioned. I am simply making the point that I don’t want my kids to take for granted their privilege and not know how to work hard like I did.

When you look at it directly, anxious attachment style and having a high Behavior Activation System are very comparable ideas. The sensitivity to punishment/negative events can be largely attributed to my low self-esteem and how much I worry about my image. The event that fuses these two ideas together is when I got braces put on my teeth. This alone contributed to many years of hating how I looked when I smiled, even though that’s all I wanted to do. It also contributed greatly to my sensitivity to harsh and unpleasant events. Having high reward responsiveness can be linked to my desire to compete and succeed and consequently my desire for approval. For me, there is very little else that gives as much satisfaction as simply winning a game. This is likely due to the fact that part of the reason that I am competing is to gain approval from my peers. When I win and gain this approval, my high responsiveness to reward/approval makes competing that much more of a pleasure.

How my parents treated me growing up greatly affected who I am today. What intrigues me the most however, is the interaction between the different parents and how that can be translated into personality characteristics. I’ve already spoken in detail about how the absence of my dad in the crucial years of my childhood greatly effected how I viewed work. This view that working hard isn’t necessary to succeed was toxic to my young mind and made it so that I now struggle with just sitting down and working. Because my dad took a mostly back seat to my nurturing, my mom stepped up in a major ways. However, in many ways she became a ‘helicopter parent’ to compensate for this. Often I found that whenever I went to her with a question on homework or about a project that she would get so invested in it that she would do the majority of the work. This was not helpful for me in my formation of how to learn and work hard either. Her always being there for me also influenced my expectations for my relationships in the present. My first few attempts at romantic relationships were a disaster because I had this expectation that we always had to be in contact with each other in order to maintain a connection. This naturally alienated many of my potential partners, but I realized this fault of mine and made a change.

It is often hard to reflect back on your childhood and pin point exactly what caused you to be a certain way. But I think that the two events that I’ve named had a more significant effect on me than any other two. Of course these experiences do not completely define me to this day, but they still remain a big part of who I am, even if I have changed a lot in college. Writing this psychoautobiography forced me to have a conversation with my mom where we talked about my childhood in a way we never have before. When I told her that work just seemed like a concept to me growing up she said that was exactly what she was worrying about during that time. She also reminded me about an email that my dad wrote to my sister and about how he was depressed about some medical issues he was going through and how he feels bad not hanging out with me more. ‘Hanging out’ with me wasn’t necessarily what I needed at the time though; it was a time when I wanted to look up at my dad and be proud of what he had accomplished and follow in his footsteps. I’m happy that this paper was assigned because it allowed me to reflect on my past and appreciate who I am now.

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