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Lori Wright

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Contact: Lori Wright
603-862-0574
UNH Media Relations

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DURHAM, N.H. -- In a far-reaching advance in the field of personality psychology, a University of New Hampshire professor has developed a new way of understanding personality and addressing the age-old question, “Who Am I?” It provides the first integrated picture of personality that combines the lasting insights of the theories of noted 20th century psychologists such as Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Carl Rogers, and their peers, with the ideas of contemporary personality.

“Everyone’s personality has good parts and bad parts. This system helps people begin to identify the parts of their personality, and whether some parts might be worth changing,” says John (Jack) Mayer, UNH professor of psychology.

Mayer presents this new system in his new book, “Personality: A Systems Approach” (Pearson/Allyn & Bacon). One of a few new textbooks published in the past several decades to present a complete redesign of the field, Mayer’s new approach has been discussed and analyzed in some of the most prominent academic journals, including the American Psychologist. Three preliminary versions of the textbook were tested in the classroom prior to publication of the first edition.

“When I taught my first course in personality years ago using Hall & Lindzey’s classic Theories of Personality, it was theory by theory. On the one hand, I believed that the broad conceptual sweep of the theories was wonderful, but, on the other hand, I found that the science was lacking. This led me on a career-long search for a better way to think about, research, and teach personality psychology,” Mayer says. “This new system combines a broad, unified perspective that integrates and highlights the best research the field has generated. The result is a new vision of personality.”

Normally personality is taught by focusing on different theoretical perspectives such as the psychodynamic, humanistic, and trait perspectives developed by the grand theorists of the early and mid-20th century such as Freud, Jung, Rogers and Maslow. Their viewpoints often appear to conflict with each other. Moreover, their ideas, although developed through careful observation, did not have the advantages of modern research techniques and findings.

“The problem with such an approach is that it relies on a somewhat outmoded, early 20th century way of thinking about psychology. The system I have developed relies on a new scientific framework that uses previous theories together to focus on a single, integrated picture of personality,” Mayer says.
Mayer worked for nearly two decades on the development of the new view of personality. He created and identified an emerging new language for the field, clarified and redefined such terms as personality, personality parts, personality structure and dynamics, arranged topics in a sensible order, and developed sub-frameworks for each subtopic.

“I love personality psychology and wanted to help bring the discipline back to life. Personality has a role in promoting public (mental) health, but it cannot help until what the discipline has discovered is better identified and organized,” Mayer says.

Mayer’s approach centers on four questions common to studying systems:

- What is personality?
- What are its parts?
- What is its organization?
- How does it develop?

With this new integrated approach, similar concepts can be compared with each other, whereas in the past they were studied in isolation. He offers a new way to divide personality consisting of a set of four broad areas of function. Freud experimented with several ways to divide the mind, including the id, ego, and superego. “Most textbooks of today deal with this as an outmoded idea, in isolation from other contemporary ideas,” he says.

Mayer’s framework, in contrast, recognizes the id, ego, and superego as a partially successful attempt to divide personality into a few important functional areas. In his new framework, Freud’s work falls under the topic personality organization, and as such, the id, ego, and superego are grouped with other attempts at dividing the mind: left-brain, right-brain, or motivation, emotion, and cognition. Once these older divisions are examined together, each can be evaluated and new, better divisions can arise.

Mayer’s approach distinguishes among four areas of personality:

- Energy Development (motivation and emotion)
- Knowledge Guidance (mental models, intelligence and imagination)
- Action Implementation (social tendencies and skills)
- Conscious Self-Regulation (self-control and awareness)

“This four-fold group covers the major systems of personality in a more comprehensive fashion than the others previously mentioned and keeps the functional areas more distinct than any of the earlier divisions,” Mayer says. “It can be used to organize the parts of personality, as well as the therapeutic techniques of many psychotherapies according to the areas of personality to which they apply.”

Mayer has published more than 90 articles, chapters, books and psychological tests. His 1990 articles on emotional intelligence with Peter Salovey of Yale University often are credited with the beginning scientific research on the topic. He is coauthor of the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) and coeditor of Emotional Intelligence in Everyday Life: A Scientific Inquiry. He has served on the editorial boards of Psychological Bulletin, Journal of
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Personality, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology and the Review of General Psychology. He holds a Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University.

REPORTERS AND EDITORS: Mayer can be reached for interviews at 603-862-3851 and jack.mayer@unh.edu.