

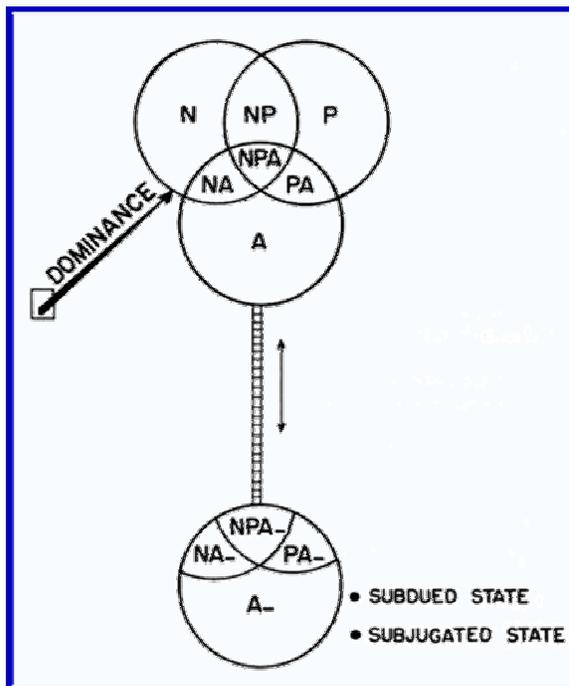
NPA Personality Theory

Personality theory based on the genetic traits of narcissism, perfectionism and aggression

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The **NPA theory of personality** was developed by A.M. Benis on the basis of concepts presented over fifty years ago by psychiatrist Karen Horney. The model posits three major behavioral traits underlying personality: narcissism (N), perfectionism (P) and aggression (A), leading to the formulation of discrete *character types*. Each trait is based on a major pleiotropic gene (a gene determining several related characteristics) that follows the rules of Mendelian genetics.

The NPA model proposes that the character traits A and N are indispensable to human development, being related to the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, respectively. The trait P is also assumed to function at the level of the central nervous system and to act as a modifier of the expression of traits A and N. The NPA model proposes to clarify the genetic bases of known personality disorders, diseases related to behavioral factors ("psychosomatic diseases") and mental illnesses. An online *NPA personality test* is available in English and French versions.



Venn diagram of dominant character types of NPA theory. Character types having the trait of aggression **A** may be reduced, reversibly, to a *subdued* or *subjugated state A-*.(see text)

Contents

- 1 What is personality?
- 2 NPA model based on three genetic traits
 - 2.1 Genetics and environment
 - 2.2 Traits of narcissism (N), perfectionism (P) and aggression (A)
 - 2.2.1 Aggression
 - 2.2.2 Narcissism
 - 2.2.3 Perfectionism
- 3 Character types
 - 3.1 Dominance: dominant character types
 - 3.1.1 N type
 - 3.1.2 A type
 - 3.1.3 NA type
 - 3.1.4 NP type
 - 3.1.5 PA type
 - 3.1.6 NPA type
 - 3.2 Submission: submissive character types
 - 3.2.1 Non-compliant types
 - 3.2.2 Compliant types
 - 3.3 Resignation: resigned character types
- 4 Borderline types and mental illness
- 5 Dominance and submission
- 6 Mendelian transmission of NPA traits
- 7 Implications of a trait theory based on genetics
 - 7.1 Population Genetics
 - 7.2 Evolutionary origins of NPA traits
 - 7.3 Predictive aspects of NPA model
- 8 Criticism and controversy
- 9 See also
- 10 References
- 11 Notes
- 12 Illustrations

What is personality?

Psychologists speak of personality as “a collection of emotional, thought and behavioral patterns unique to a person that is consistent over time”.^[1] Although many investigators have proposed various theories of personality, no objectively testable model has emerged. The NPA model falls into the category of a trait theory of personality, its unique approach being that it is biologically based on classical human genetics.

NPA model based on three genetic traits

Genetics and environment

Although it is universally accepted that both genetic and environmental factors (or "nature and nurture") comprise personality, the relevant genes have yet to be identified.^[2] Studies of the heritability of personality factors conducted with identical and fraternal twins emphasize the importance of genetics in behavior.^[3] The NPA model acknowledges the possible importance of environment and culture in personality but emphasizes that it is the genetic, or structural, factors that first need to be identified.

The NPA model acknowledges that the genetic bases of personality are themselves complex. It assumes at least four tiers to this genetic basis:

- male or female gender
- character type based on the three NPA traits
- temperament, or the degree of activity or excitability of an individual in the pavlovian sense
- other facets of personality, such as Raymond Cattell's 16 Personality Factors, Hans Eysenck's P-E-N model of personality, or the life style approaches of enneagram theory.

The NPA model, thus, focuses on only the second of these four tiers, acknowledging that *temperament* and *other facets of personality* may involve a large number of genes.



Karen Horney (1885-1952)

Traits of narcissism (N), perfectionism (P) and aggression (A)

Karen Horney advanced the concept that at maturity there exist at least three expansive character types, namely the "narcissistic", the "perfectionistic" and the "arrogant-vindictive".^[4] Extending these ideas, the NPA model posits that the human character rests primarily on the existence of three major traits: narcissism (N), perfectionism (P) and aggression (A). Each of these traits is assumed to exist as the expression of a single major pleiotropic gene. Horney considered that the traits have environmental origins, being the result of an individual's desperate search for dominance in the context of a stifling upbringing.^[5] The NPA model -- in ascribing the traits to genetic origins -- emphasizes biological attributes associated with the traits.

Aggression

The behavioral trait of **aggression** is acknowledged to be the most labile of the three.^[6] The stereotypic acts associated with this trait involve body posturing, gestures, and eye contact of intimidation and deference, with individuals having this trait continually competing with each other on a scale of dominance and submission. The trait of aggression corresponds to a striving for power over one's environment, hence it is one main component of competitiveness in social relations, or ambition. In a pejorative connotation the trait may reveal itself in the context of sadism or sadomasochism. The facial expression is non-sanguine, i.e., tending toward sallowness or pallor in individuals of light skin color. The hallmark of the trait of aggression is a mass discharge of the sympathetic nervous system: the "fight or flight" response or the *aggressive-vindictive rage*. During the expression of this rage, the facial complexion of pallor is accentuated.

Narcissism

The trait of **narcissism** is noted to be less labile than that of aggression (where individuals may be constantly altering their character states on a scale of dominance and submission).^[6] The stereotypic acts associated with the trait include self-flaunting body posturing, expansive arm gestures, bowing, instinctive self-adornment, and a natural attraction to the limelight of personal recognition. Individuals having only this trait (of the three) are competitive but non-aggressive in their strivings for recognition. The trait corresponds to a striving for glory in one's environment, representing the second main component of human ambition. In a pejorative connotation, the unbridled trait of narcissism may reveal itself in the context of conceit, exhibitionism, vanity or messianism. An associated facial expression includes the radiant gingival smile (broadly exposing the gums and teeth). The facial complexion in individuals of light skin color tends toward blood-red or ruddy. Hallmarks of the trait include blushing, flushing, and a mass discharge of the parasympathetic nervous system: the *narcissistic rage* of defense and withdrawal. During expression of this rage the normally sanguine complexion becomes even more florid.

Perfectionism

The trait of **perfectionism** in the NPA model is not a basic drive of ambition and is not associated with a rage reaction.^[6] Rather it is a mediator of the unbridled drives of aggression and/or narcissism. The stereotypic acts associated with the trait of perfectionism are obsessiveness, compulsiveness, repetition, and the maintenance of neatness, order and symmetry. A clue to the nature of the trait lies in the compulsive, repetitive mannerisms of autistic children and some adult schizophrenic individuals. The behavioral pattern is often ritualistic and the speech characterized by echolalia. It is posited that such autistic and schizophrenic individuals are those in whom the two components of ambition, i.e. aggression and narcissism, have been suppressed by genetic or environmental factors, either congenitally, in childhood, or after maturity, thus revealing in the individual a primitive state of perfectionism.

Character types



Character types according to the ancient theory of humors: phlegmaticus, cholericus, sanguineous and melancholicus. [J.K. Lavater, 1775]

The notion that humans exhibit only a limited number of discrete character types can be traced back to the time of the ancient Greeks, in particular to the theory of humors (blood, black bile, yellow bile and phlegm). The NPA model attempts to relate genetic NPA types to these character types of antiquity, as well as to the classic personality disorders of modern psychiatry.

Dominance: dominant character types

In **dominant types** the traits A and N, if present at all, are fully expressed.^[6] The NPA model generates the following dominant character types:

N type

The **narcissistic (N) type** is found in the writings of Karen Horney^[7] and others who have developed the classic psychiatric views of narcissism. In the NPA model this type is the equivalent of the sanguine character type described by the ancients. The important attributes of this type are: expansiveness but unaggressiveness, non-perfectionism, a tendency to flamboyant self-adornment, a natural attraction to the limelight, the gingival smile of recognition and the florid narcissistic rage. In extreme forms this type appears as a self-anointed visionary, a proselytizing evangelist or a messianic personality.

A type

The **aggressive (A) type** corresponds to Horney's arrogant-vindictive type and to her concept of "moving against people".^[8] In the NPA model this is the classic choleric character type of antiquity. The main attributes of this type are: unbridled arrogance, instinctual vindictiveness, non-perfectionism, no tendency to self-adornment, a wry or sardonic grin in place of a gingival smile, and the pallid-complexioned aggressive-vindictive rage. In extreme forms this type appears as a sadistic personality, as an extroverted paranoid personality, or as the so-called antisocial or sociopathic personality.

NA type

The **narcissistic-aggressive (NA) type** is regarded to be a composite of the previously described narcissistic and aggressive types. Horney described the essence of this character type, in the female, in an article, "The overvaluation of love: a study of a common present day type".^[9] The main attributes of this type are: a sanguine complexion, synergistic merging of unbridled narcissism and aggression, hyperactivity, non-perfectionism, a tendency toward extreme self-adornment, exhibitionism in the limelight, a "flashy" extroverted smile, a tendency toward hypersexuality, and the capacity to exhibit the narcissistic, aggressive-vindictive or combined narcissistic-aggressive rages. In extreme forms this character type appears as the hypomanic, histrionic or hysterical personality.

NP type

The attributes of the **narcissistic-perfectionist (NP) type** were described by Horney in her exposition of the "perfectionist type".^[4] In the NPA model this encompasses the classic phlegmatic type known to the ancients. The main qualities of this type are: a tendency toward a sanguine complexion, industriousness, orderliness, an intense sense of duty, unaggressiveness, stubbornness, negativism, a tendency to ruminate, perfectionistic rather than unbridled self-adornment, an

uncommonly seen gingival smile of recognition, and the capacity to exhibit the florid narcissistic rage. In extreme forms this character appears as the obsessive-compulsive personality.

PA type

The **perfectionistic-aggressive (PA) type** is alluded to by Horney in her mention of aggressive types who function in the capacity of a "power behind the throne",^[8] that is, personages who utilize intellectual qualities and planning rather than overt aggression to achieve their aims. In the NPA model this is the classic non-sanguine, austere melancholic personality of the ancients. The principal qualities of this type are: a non-sanguine complexion, passive aggressiveness, dour perfectionism, vigilance, manipulateness, a proud bearing, haughty reservedness, a calculated vindictiveness, a lack of an innate tendency to self-adornment, a sardonic grin, and the pallid-complexioned aggressive-vindictive rage. In extreme forms this is the passive-aggressive, rebellious-distrustful, or ruminating paranoid personality.

NPA type

The **narcissistic-perfectionistic-aggressive (NPA) type** was not explicitly described by Horney, although she did note that the three traits can coexist in the same individual.^[10] The main attributes of this type are: a sanguine complexion, a loud voice, dynamism with a tendency to be overbearing, bombastic garrulity, intense eye contact, a strong sense of duty, a bent toward conventional values, unpretentious self-adornment, an outgoing smile of moderate intensity, and the capacity to exhibit the narcissistic, aggressive, or explosive narcissistic-aggressive rages. In the extreme cases this individual is the managerial-autocratic or explosive personality.

Submission: submissive character types

In **submissive types** the trait of aggression is not fully expressed.^[6] The NPA model defines two gradations of submission: *non-compliance*, in which the individual is basically submissive but is easily activated to an energetic state of aggression, and *compliance*, in which the individual tends to remain in a profound state of submission.

In the model the state of submission most often has a genetic basis, the result of a congenital, inherited, incomplete expression of the gene for the trait A. However, the model also allows for environmental causes, the state of submission being induced during the juvenile period on the basis of environmental constraints to character development. That is, phenocopies (based on environmental factors) of a genetically disposed submissive state may exist. Also, like dominant types having full expression of the trait A, submissive types may exhibit the *aggressive-vindictive rage*.

Non-compliant types

The model denotes the state of *non-compliance* by A^- , obtaining the following **non-compliant submissive** phenotypes:

- **Aggressive (A-)**
- **Perfectionistic-aggressive (PA-)**
- **Narcissistic (NA-)**
- **Narcissistic-perfectionistic (NPA-)**

Compliant types

The model denotes the state of *compliance* by $A=$, obtaining the following **compliant submissive** phenotypes:

- **Aggressive (A=)**
- **Perfectionistic-aggressive (PA=)**
- **Narcissistic (NA=)**
- **Narcissistic-perfectionistic (NPA=)**

The **NPA- non-compliant type** above corresponds to active, motivated, non-confrontational individuals whose baseline personality tends toward submissiveness, as described by Horney in her discussion of inverted sadistic behavior.^[11] In the therapeutic setting, these individuals are found over the spectrum of "type A", dependent, and phobic-anxious personality. The **NA- type** is a non-perfectionistic, active individual exhibiting pronounced narcissistic behavior. In the therapeutic setting this is a cyclothymic or dependent histrionic personality.

The **compliant types NA=** and **NPA=** above correspond to more profoundly submissive individuals, having more pronounced tendencies toward masochistic behavior.^[12] They correspond to Karen Horney's compliant "self-effacing" personality and to her concept of "moving toward people".^[13]

Resignation: resigned character types

In the character state of **resignation** the trait of aggression is stunted after maturity because of environmental constraints.^[6] Unlike submissive types who readily involve themselves in the relative competition of dominance and submission (and sometimes sadomasochism), resigned types remain relatively detached from such activities and only with difficulty can be stressed to a state of active aggression. However, like submissive types, resigned types can be induced into the *aggressive-vindictive rage*.

The model denotes the *state of resignation* by $-A$, obtaining the following **resigned** phenotypes:

- **Aggressive (-A)**
- **Perfectionistic-aggressive (P-A)**
- **Narcissistic (N-A)**
- **Narcissistic-perfectionistic (NP-A)**

The resigned types having the narcissistic trait correspond to detached individuals, as described by Karen Horney. She considered that "moving away from people" was a maladaptive response that could develop as a growing individual struggled toward maturity.^[14] The **NP-A type** would tend to have strong perfectionistic tendencies, while the **N-A type** would be more labile.

Borderline types and mental illness

In the NPA model **borderline types** possess only one of the traits of ambition (N or A) and it is only partially expressed, while types in which both the traits (N and A) are profoundly suppressed fall into categories of mental illness, in particular schizophrenia.^[6] Thus, NPA theory predicts that the categories of *borderline personality* and *schizophrenia* are heterogeneous, depending on the underlying NPA character structure. Examples of *borderline types* would be **A-** or **PA-** above. Types falling into the categories of *mental illness* would be **A=** or **PA=**.

One aspect of the model focuses on the dominant types N and NP, which lack the trait A.^[6] In analogy with partial expression of the trait A, the theory identifies states of incomplete expression of the trait N, denoted as *N-* *N=*, and *-N*. Examples of *borderline types* would be **N-** or **N-P** above. Types falling into the categories of *mental illness* would be **N=** or **N=P**, the latter being a perfectionistic, autistic individual.

Dominance and submission

In the NPA model *dominant* character types having the trait A have the potential of being reduced to a subdued state acutely or to a subjugated state chronically (see figure at the head of this page). Similarly, *submissive* types have the potential of being activated to an energetic A+ state resembling dominance, usually for short periods of time. Thus, the model emphasizes the potential lability of trait A in social relations, with dominant and submissive types continually altering their behavior in competitive interactions with other individuals and in the context of mating. In the extreme, some of these relationships fall into the category of sadomasochism.^[15] *Resigned* types, in their detachment from social interactions, usually avoid dominance-submission relationships and, in particular, hierarchal structures where "pecking orders" predominate.

Mendelian transmission of NPA traits

On the basis of archetypal examples, the model assumes that in their full expression the NPA traits are transmitted by autosomal genes, with traits A and N being recessive and trait P being transmitted in the dominant mode.^[6] The alleles corresponding to full expression and total suppression of the trait A are denoted by **a** and **a~**, respectively, and the corresponding alleles for the trait N are denoted by **n** and **n~**. For the trait P two alleles **p** and **p~** are posited, corresponding to full expression or total absence of the trait P, on the assumption that the trait is always transmitted with complete penetrance. This scheme of inheritance is consistent with the notion that the alleles **a~** and **n~** control the production of inhibitors of the traits A and N at the level of the central nervous system, with alleles **a~** and **n~** being dominant with respect to **a** and **n**. This scheme of inheritance of the NPA traits leads

directly to the table below, showing the **possible phenotypes of children according to the phenotypes of the parents:**

N	N --- NA --- ----	"	"	"	"	"
A	N --- NA --- 0 A	---- NA --- -- A	"	"	"	"
NP	N NP -- NA NPA -- ---	N NP P NA NPA PA 0 A	N NP -- NA NPA -- ---	"	"	"
NA	N --- NA --- ---	---- NA --- -- A	N NP -- NA NPA -- ---	---- NA --- ---	"	"
PA	N NP P NA NPA PA 0 A	---- NA NPA PA -- A	N NP P NA NPA PA 0 A	---- NA NPA PA -- A	---- NA NPA PA -- A	"
NPA	N NP -- NA NPA -- ---	---- NA NPA PA -- A	N NP -- NA NPA -- ---	---- NA NPA -- ---	---- NA NPA PA -- A	---- NA NPA -- ---
FATHER OR MOTHER	N	A	NP	NA	PA	NPA

Table 1. Possible phenotypes of children according to the phenotypes of the parents. The phenotypes of the father and mother are shown along the axes of the table. P and null (0) phenotypes by the model (shown in red) are non-viable and would result in miscarriage, stillbirth or an infant who fails to thrive.

The table shows:

- N and A individuals need not have N or A parents. Such individuals can arise *de novo* so long as at least one of the parents is an NP and PA individual, respectively.
- PA individuals must have at least one parent who is of either the PA or A type.
- NP individuals must have at least one parent who is of either the NP or N type.
- NA individuals can arise *de novo* from any combination of phenotypes.
- The mating of two NA types can yield progeny of only NA types.

- The mating of an NPA type with an NA type can yield progeny of only NPA or NA types.
- Certain combinations of parental genotypes may lead to zygotes having only the P trait (P phenotype) or lacking all three traits (null phenotype, denoted by 0). According to NPA theory, zygotes of P or null phenotype would be non-viable. Thus, the model predicts partial or complete infertility in some combinations of parental phenotypes, these being N×A, N×PA, NP×A and NP×PA.

Implications of a trait theory based on genetics

Population Genetics

A trait theory based on genetics would imply that the personality structure of a population could be expressed in definitive mathematical terms. The NPA model is amenable to the Hardy-Weinberg approach to quantify the distribution of NPA character types in a given subpopulation.^[16] With the usual assumptions of gene frequencies n , p and a and random mating, expressions for the relative incidences of dominant character types are given in the table below. Because of the occurrence of non-viable P and null (0) phenotypes, the assumptions of Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium would not hold, the incidences below representing the phenotypes of the first generation only.

Relative incidence of phenotypes on basis of gene frequencies n , p and a	
<u>Phenotype</u>	<u>Relative incidence</u>
N	$n^2 \times (1-p)^2 \times (1-a^2)$
A	$(1-n^2) \times (1-p)^2 \times a^2$
NP	$n^2 \times p(2-p) \times (1-a^2)$
NA	$n^2 \times (1-p)^2 \times a^2$
PA	$(1-n^2) \times p(2-p) \times a^2$
NPA	$n^2 \times p(2-p) \times a^2$
P	$2n(1-n) \times p(2-p) \times 2a(1-a)$
null (0)	$2n(1-n) \times (1-p)^2 \times 2a(1-a)$

Table 2. Relative incidences of phenotypes for the first generation. The incidence for each phenotype is the product of three probabilities, corresponding to the presence or absence of the three traits N, P and A. The P and null types are non-viable and contribute neither to parentage nor issue.

The assumption of numerical values for the three gene frequencies n , p and a generates a hypothetical subpopulation, or *habitancy*:^[16]

HABITANCY						
Phenotype	Balanced	Punctilious	Sublime	Demonstrative	Authoritarian	Militant
N	7	3	77	2	1	1
A	3	<1	<1	2	17	34
NP	22	78	18	7	2	1
NA	13	<1	3	20	6	11
PA	9	2	<1	7	52	35
NPA	39	8	1	61	17	12
P	4	8	<1	1	4	2
null (0)	1	<1	1	<1	1	2
Gene frequencies	$n = 0.90$	$n = 0.90$	$n = 0.99$	$n = 0.95$	$n = 0.50$	$n = 0.50$
	$p = 0.50$	$p = 0.80$	$p = 0.10$	$p = 0.50$	$p = 0.50$	$p = 0.30$
	$a = 0.80$	$a = 0.30$	$a = 0.20$	$a = 0.95$	$a = 0.95$	$a = 0.95$

Table 3. Frequencies of phenotypes in six habitancies (per 100 zygotes, or pregnancies). The non-viable P and null (0) phenotypes are shown in red. Non-viable types arise when the zygote has neither trait N nor A. The above analysis is confined to dominant character types on the assumption of two alleles for each NPA gene.

In the table above six habitancies are given with descriptive labels: *Balanced*, *Punctilious*, *Sublime*, *Demonstrative*, *Authoritarian* and *Militant*. The intent of the labels is to emphasize the very different tenors of each of the distributions of character types.

The table demonstrates that:

- Relatively small changes in gene frequencies could cause large changes in the phenotype frequencies.
- The frequencies of non-viable P and null types are low for these habitancies, on the order of 0 to 8 percent.

Other hypothetical distributions of *dominant NPA character types*, for any combination of gene frequencies, may be calculated [[here](#)].

Evolutionary origins of NPA traits



*NPA theory proposes that the baboon is a likely perfectionist-aggressive **PA** type*

The assumption of a genetic basis to the traits *N*, *P* and *A* implies that their origins reside in the evolution of humans from precursor species, and in particular, that the traits are likely to be found in primates other than *homo sapiens*. As examples, the model leads to proposed character types as follows:

- The omnivorous, hierarchal, unsmiling baboon, known for its lengthy grooming rituals, would be a likely perfectionist-aggressive *PA* type.
- The herbivorous, aloof, phlegmatic orangutan and gorilla, capable of gingival smiles, would be likely *NP* types.
- Akin to humans, the omnivorous, promiscuous chimpanzee, also capable of the gingival smile, would likely have a heterogeneous distribution of types, with *NA* and *NPA* types predominating.

Predictive aspects of NPA model

The model would have the potential to be predictive in the following categories:

- The possible genetic character types of children could be deduced from the character types of parents.
- Relations could be defined between genetic character type and susceptibility to certain physical and mental diseases
- Combinations of parental character types prone to infertility problems (miscarriage and stillbirth) could be identified, these combinations being ones which permit the occurrence of a fetus lacking in both traits *N* and *A*
- Allele frequencies for the *NPA* traits, as well as the resultant distributions of *NPA* character types, in various societies could be analyzed on the basis of well-known principles of population genetics.
- Studies with primates could confirm a biological basis for behavior in the areas of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology.

Criticism and controversy

Controversy has always followed past positions taken by the scientific community relating human behaviour to inheritance, as in Arthur Jensen's theories of intelligence, Herrnstein and Murray's "The Bell Curve", or Lewontin and colleagues' "Not in Our Genes"; the NPA personality theory is not exempt. The result of the "nature versus nurture" debate has been that a gauntlet had been thrown to those who espouse genetic underpinnings to behaviour: "show us the relevant genes".

The slow progress of unraveling of the genetic basis of personality is the subject of a recent review article by Jang and colleagues.^[2] They point out the lack of any genetic framework in the classification of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of American psychiatry*, and the pressing need to identify "genetically crisp" characteristics – or genetic traits of behaviour that are independent of competing genetic and environmental influences.

The NPA model posits narcissism to be a genetic trait, being related to the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, just as aggression is classically related to the sympathetic branch. This concept of narcissism, and the associated narcissistic rage, is not found in any branch of classical medicine or psychiatry and remains a key point requiring validation. Of note is the recent study by Livesley and colleagues^[3] with identical and fraternal twins. They found that of a total of eighteen dimensions of personality it was narcissism that clearly had the highest heritability.

The manuscript of the NPA model was copyrighted with the Library of Congress in 1982, being published in book form in 1985^[17] and in a peer-reviewed journal in 1990^[6]. A revised electronic edition in PDF format was released in 2004 and the online *NPA personality test* in 2005. Studies are in progress utilizing the *NPA personality test* in obstetric and gynecological patients.^[18] The number of subjects taking and submitting the online test, for personal reasons, exceeds ten thousand per year.

Although the NPA model is several decades old, it has not been validated in the sense of withstanding scrutiny by the scientific method – as is true of all other theories of personality as well. Given the recent advances in deciphering the human genome, such scrutiny may soon be possible. The ideas of Karen Horney have been resilient over time, and the validity of her observations that form the basis of the NPA model awaits the relevant studies in the realm of behavioral genetics.

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18. by Donna Hobgood, Clinical attending physician, University of Tennessee College of Medicine, Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Illustrations

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