

Personality Psychology with Dr. Simine Vazire

Ologies Podcast

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Oh hey! So, this episode of Ologies is, in part, sponsored by the *Timesuck Podcast*, which explores true crime, and the paranormal, and history, and so much more. The host, Dan Cummins, deep dives into topics like Shadow People, and Ted Bundy, and Stalin, and Scientology, Vlad the Impaler, really dark humor and intense research. I have learned so much history from this podcast! This week Dan examines the McNeil treatment center, aka Pedophile Island. What do you do with high-risk sex offenders? So, listen to *Timesuck* wherever you listen to podcasts. TimesuckPodcast.com. I think you will like it.

Oh, heeeeeeey! It's your old roommate who always subscribed to magazines that you read but were too embarrassed to buy, Alie Ward, back with another episode of *Ologies*. Okay, so please imagine me right now; I am wearing a Sherlock Holmes flappy wool overcoat that smells like a wet dog in the rain. Also, I have a walrus mustache and a decorative pipe because we're about to investigate the mysteries of the psyche. What makes you, you? Who are you? Who am I? Why are we like this?

First, let's show some goddamn gratitude for one second and say thank you to everyone on Patreon who supports the show for a dollar or more a month, also all the folks getting Ologies merch at OlogiesMerch.com. And all the nice people who hit subscribe, and who rate the show, and leave reviews like a friendliness fairy in the night for me to read. For example, this week from Lalajuju [phonetic] who says:

I love Alie Ward.

Thank you, Lalajuju. I love you too.

I also love science, and learning. When I heard about this, it was better than I could have imagined. I can learn about different Ologies while I am at work or getting ready for work. Once my eleven-year-old daughter got wind of this podcast, from me, she started listening too. I never told her to! She just listened on her own.

So Lalajuju, thank you for sharing the gift of Ologies with your 11-year-old. I am very sorry that I am teaching her how to swear.

Okay. Onward, Ward. Personality psychology. I really wish that there was a weirder, documented name for this -ology, and for a second I thought the academic study of 'Personology' could apply. I was like, "Yes!!" But the guy that coined personology, Henry Murray, essentially peed on the word to make it his forever. And he had a really heavy hand in founding the study of personality - that's great - but he's also noted as having done some hella sketchy, and maybe damaging, experiments on a young man named Ted Kaczynski, who later became a terrorist known as The Unabomber. Dr Murray, also linked to government mind control experiments, MKUltra, not to be confused with Michelob Ultra. So my point is, Personology was off the table for this episode title. We had to go with the clunkier, well-respected, and academically recognized Personality Psychology.

So this Ologist had been on my list for months, and one chilly December day, I made my way to UC Davis to meet her on a corner near campus and I drove by one minute late, and I screamed out the window, "Hold on! I have to park!" thinking it would take one second to park because school wasn't even in session, it was December 26th. But the city was under construction so I had to circle the block, maybe 52 times, and then I was 7 minutes late to the corner. I felt like a very bad, not conscientious person, but she was so cool about it. We walked to her office, where she is a Professor in the Department of Psychology. She's also been a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, and her focus is on people's own awareness of their personalities and how personality and relationships influence your life and make it suck more or less.

She's coauthored papers with titles like, "Others Sometimes Know Us Better Than We Know Ourselves" and this salty goodness, "You Probably Think Paper's About You: Narcissists' Perception of Their Personality And Reputation." She studies all the stuff that if you were sitting next to her on an airplane, you'd be like, "Tell me everything before this flight to Japan lands!" So, we chatted about first impressions, introverts, extroverts, ambiverts, narcissists, psychopaths, whether or not psychology researchers believe self-reported data, how parenting affects personalities, and if you're screwing your kids up, what personalities work best together, if astrology is in any way on point, some textbooks you'd actually want to read, and I essentially asked her ten different ways, [*echoing*] "Why am I *this*?"

So get comfy, and gaze into your brain with someone I wish I could call a personologist, but that Murray dude made it awkward for everybody so instead we'll just use the more common and scientifically acceptable Personality Psychologist, Dr. Simine Vazire.

Dr. Simine Vazire: Simine Vazire.

Alie Ward: Mm-hmm. Doctor? [*both laugh*]

Simine: I tell my students to call me by my first name, so anything's fine.

Alie: Really? Are they uncomfortable with it at first, like it's not reverent?

Simine: Some of them are, yeah. But I find that, well, because of my personality, I think I have to worry more about not being approachable enough rather than being too casual or not having enough boundaries. For different people different things work, but for me, asking... they don't have to call me by my first name, but telling them they can reduces that distance a little bit, which tends to be the bigger challenge for me.

Alie: And you said, 'because of your personality,' which gets us right into your work because you study not only personality psychology, but also people's own awareness and knowledge of their own personality, so you seem to know yours pretty well.

Simine: I know some aspects of mine. I'm sure that I have blind spots too. We have this expression in academia called 'me-search,' which is where you study like what you're bad at. So I think I'm probably overall average on self-knowledge, but I now I have some blind spots for sure.

Alie: What did you start to notice about your personality when you got into this work?

Simine: I think I was really fascinated by the differences between how people see themselves and how others see them. And I think it's really rare that we find out how other people see us. I remember at the end of high school, one of my friends wrote in my yearbook, "I always admired you because you don't care what people think." And I was like, "What do people think?" *[both laugh]*

So I had no idea that I came across as not caring what people thought. And I was like, "Well, maybe I care less than other people." I experience myself as caring a LOT what other people think.

Alie: Right!

Simine: But then I realized, well, I don't wear makeup, I don't put a lot of thought into my clothing, so if I really cared what people think maybe I would've been doing those things. So then I was like, "Oh. Maybe relative to other people I actually do care less what people think." But, like, yearbooks are one of the rare places where people sometimes tell you a little bit about what they think of you.

My best friend and I in high school and I used to write each other notes, we shared a locker, we would leave each other notes in our locker. And she wrote me a note sophomore year of high school, and it said, "You asked me at the party on Saturday what I thought of your personality, and so I wanted to tell you what I think of your personality." And she's like, "You're a nine out of ten, but don't worry, you wouldn't want to be a ten out of ten because those people are annoying." And it was just really funny that, apparently, when I was 14 or 15 years old, I was asking my best friend what she thought of my personality, it was crazy!

Alie: You were doing personality research in your locker!

Simine: Yeah, yeah, it's so funny. It was so funny when I found that.

Alie: Did she say what that docked point was for?

Simine: No, I don't know. She went on to tell me more specific things, 'cause like, nine out of ten doesn't really mean anything. But I don't remember now. I actually took a picture of it and have a PDF so that I don't ever lose it. It would be interesting to go back and look, but I don't remember what the specific criticisms were. There were some. They weren't mean or anything.

Aside: I sent Simine a note to ask if she ever found that PDF, and she emailed me right back with the PDF itself! Oh! What a time capsule of vulnerability! I love her! So of course, I read it. Here are some of the things that her friend, Geraline, [ph.] hand wrote on a greeting card that was a 1995 dot matrix picture of a turkey. So, an excerpt:

I think you are very good at understanding people, but sometimes a little too harsh in your judgment. You're spirited, you motivate people, and you are a good sport about things. You're trustworthy and honest. One important quality, your morals are wonderful! Another great thing I like about you, you're always learning about yourself and growing. Your influence and friendship is part of what makes me, me, and I have to thank you because I like myself. And your friendship has meant a lot to me over the years.

Ah! Not only is this an honest and sweet-ass letter from a best friend, but how precious to see that personality psychology and how people see themselves is something that Simine has been low-key researching since the dot matrix days!

Also, this prompted me to look back at some old school papers, and I found an old yearbook of mine with inscriptions that were like, "You're weird, but fun I guess." And one from a guy named Erik in my science class who, in the fashion of middle management inscribed, "Here's a piece of advice. Try to calm down. You always seem to be going in fast forward." Okay. So, nothing's changed.

Alie: Oh my God! I think that that's something that so many people want to know, how do others see them versus how they see themselves and... Did you grow up, you know, earlier than high school thinking about this, or was it really when you started to get around peers and go through adolescence that you started thinking about it?

Simine: Yeah, that's a good question... [*"Thank you"*] I mean, I grew up pretty close to my brother, we were one year apart in school, so I think I always looked at the differences between him and me, and within our families we had, kind of, different roles and personalities. Now that we are adults I see that we are actually really, really similar compared to the broader population. But yeah, it was always interesting to me, like, the things that he was scared of and I wasn't, or vice versa. So, I think it was on my radar earlier on but I think it becomes really relevant when you have friend groups, and who doesn't get invited to the party, and why, and you know, what do people think of you, what's your role in your friend group, and all that.

Alie: When did you start steering your career that way?

Simine: I took a personality psych class and had a really good teacher and a really good textbook, so I think it was that class in particular that got me into it. Yeah.

Alie: Did you ever take those personality quizzes in magazines or... ?

Simine: Yeah, definitely. Yeah.

Alie: Is there any merit to those at all?

Simine: Probably not. Or if there is, it's probably by accident. It's actually not that hard to write a valid personality quiz. The ones that don't seem completely ridiculous probably actually do have merit, so if it's a test of your extroversion and it asks if you like to go to parties, if you like to hang out with people, that's probably pretty valid. But if it's a test of your extroversion and it asks if you like Bernese mountain dogs or chihuahuas, [*Alie laughs*] that's probably not a valid measurement of your extroversion.

Alie: That is what we call bullshit, rather.

Aside: If you wanted to take a bullshit quiz, ooh.. oh there's plenty waiting for you. Such as, BuzzFeed's: What type of sandwich are you? Which '90s cartoon series are you? What piece of IKEA furniture are you? Or Livingly's: Your choice in late night snacks will reveal your dominant personality type. Or, which Meghan Markle are you? Zimbardo's: Are you a Robin Williams Genie, or a Will Smith Genie? And finally, BuzzFeed's Which

BuzzFeed quiz are you? So, how does Simine's methodology differ from these inciteful surveys?

Alie: And so, when you're doing research on personalities, what does that involve? Are you asking people about their own personalities, or are you grabbing their best friend and asking, "What's their deal?" Like, how are you getting the data?

Simine: Yeah, it's all of the above. So, we try to get every measurement we can think of because none of them is a direct pipeline, right? There's no pure measure of someone's personality, so we ask them what they're like, we give them a questionnaire with dozens, or sometimes hundreds, of questions about their personality. And then we give a similar questionnaire to their friends or family members, whoever they let us contact, and ask those people to describe the person on the same kind of questionnaire. We also try to get something independent of both them and their friends or family so that we can try to gauge who's right, or who's more accurate. [*Alie laughs*]

And that's a challenge, 'cause those are the two easiest methods, right, asking people to fill out questionnaires is easier than almost anything else. So the challenge with getting a third measure, something other than self and friends, we try to get actual behavior. We want to observe what people are like, but the trick with that is if you bring people into the lab and observe their behavior that might not be what they're really like.

Aside: I keep picturing myself stiffly walking in, trying to conceal a mustard stain on my scarf, wearing an expression of desperation to blend in. [*computer voice, "Hello. I am healthy and normal."*]

Simine: So, we try to do it in a naturalistic way, get people in their everyday lives, so we have this audio recorder that our participants agree to wear if they're willing to. And it's really just an iPod Touch, but we program it so that the audio recording aspect of it comes on and off, and so they just clip it to the outside of their clothes or their bag and they wear it for, for example, a week, and it comes on and off, and they don't know exactly when it's on or off. And then when they turn it in we tell them, "We're going to give you a disc with all the files. You can delete any files, or tell us which files to delete, you know. Actually, people end up being fine with leaving all of them on. But we want to make sure that they're really okay with it. We give them a lot of opportunities.

Aside: I had done some research of Simine's work ahead of time, and I was so excited she brought this up right away. So these devices are called EARs. It stands for Electronically Activated Recorder. Which is very cute. Technically, that's called a backronym, when something that stands for something else is cute on purpose.

So, the most common capture pattern they do is recording for 30 seconds every 12 minutes. Then the volunteers fill out an hourly report of what they were up to. They also wear a button that says, essentially, "Hey! Someone might be recording this and listening to this, so let me know if that freaks you the fuck out or whatever."

Also, this made me wonder, aren't our phones just always eavesdropping all the time anyway? Just ready to sell us something we casually mentioned in a conversation? Well, a

study from Northwestern University came out last year that tracked over 17,000 apps to see if they were recording our conversations about, like, vegan marshmallows and platform sneakers. And the researchers, well, they didn't say no. They just said that they 'couldn't find evidence' of the activities taking place. So it's not *not* listening to you.

Anyway, some personality psychologists recording conversations to untangle the mysteries of the human mind-- pretty benign. It's not like the UC Davis research team includes old Zuckerberg at his laptop sending you coupons for off-brand Invisalign, or geometric sloth necklaces, which is what my Instagram just tried to sell me -- which was spot-on, though. It's pretty good. Well played, Big Brother.

Simine: So it's about 5% of the time that it's on.

Alie: Just random snippets of your life.

Simine: Yes. So, 30 seconds turns out to be long enough that we can figure out; are you socializing? Are you working? Are you watching TV? And if you're socializing; is it a group of people? Or is it one-on-one? Is it a deep conversation? Or is it superficial? So we can tell a lot about what people are doing, just the behaviors and also the psychological context that they're in. It turns out, a 30-second clip gives you quite a bit of information about what people are up to without violating their privacy too much. *[laughs]*

Alie: *[laughs]* And then, so you take all those files and you figure out, "Okay. This is how often the person was around other people, or talking to other people, this is how much they were alone, this is how much they were using, maybe, violent or sexual language, so you can kinda categorize and interpret the data that way?"

Simine: Yeah. So for example, from the questionnaires, if you said you are not very funny but your friend said you're really funny, then we can listen to the sound files and have a group of coders who are relatively neutral and objective, who don't know you, they can rate how funny you were in your conversations, and then we can say who is more accurate, you or your friends.

Alie: Wow! *["You're so funny!"]*

Alie: And now, what are you studying when you're looking at this data? Do you do, maybe, one study on extroversion and one on narcissism, or... What are you looking for?

Simine: Yeah, that's a really good question. Because it's so hard to collect these data, we measure everything we can think of.

Aside: A bunch of people, too many to name, asked what tests they use, and boom! Here it is. In five, four, three, two, one...

Simine: So, we use a model called The Big Five, which is a model of personality that says there's five, kind of, broad dimensions along which people differ. For example, one of them is extroversion, and in each of those five categories there's specific traits. In the extroversion category there's how sociable the person is, how talkative they are, how assertive they are, so there's like more specific personality traits in each of the five categories. It's not that there's only five personality traits, but there's five, kind of, clusters of personality traits.

So we measure those, and then we also throw in other things that we think aren't really well captured by the Big Five. Narcissism is one example of something that we think doesn't fall neatly into one of those five categories. So we measure, you know, a handful of other traits beyond the Big Five as well.

Aside: So, real quick, what is the Big Five? It's a bunch of questions, it takes maybe eight minutes to complete, it measures essentially what your deal is. It's also called the very unspicy name, Five Factors Model, or the exciting acronym OCEAN, because these factors are measured: Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. So you can flip those words around and make it spell CANOE if you are more of an inland-lakes rather than an open sea kind of person. [*big splashing*]

Simine: Our research isn't really about one specific personality trait. What we really want to know is how accurate people are at describing themselves in general. So we might, you know, look at how accurate they are about how funny they are but actually we are interested in also how accurate they are about how extroverted they are, and how narcissistic they are, and everything else.

Alie: What do you think is a trait that tends to get misreported the most?

Simine: So, I don't have a lot of evidence for this, but my intuition, my hunch... And we're starting to collect data on this and have some evidence for, but I could be wrong. My hunch is that we're not very good at judging our own, what in personality psychology we call, "agreeableness," which is basically how polite, and kind, and considerate you are. [*clip from movie, "I'm so sorry!" "No, I'm sorry!"*]

And that all sounds like a good thing, and everybody wants to be really agreeable, but actually it can be taken too far. People who are too agreeable are, kind of, doormats, they won't stick up for people they care about, or things they believe in, things like that. So I don't want to paint it as only good things. Like most personality traits there's good and bad components to it, or it can backfire in some situations. But I think it's a dimension that we're really bad at judging in ourselves, or at least that's my intuition.

Alie: Do you think that we think we're more agreeable than we are?

Simine: I think some people think they're more agreeable than they are, and some people think they're less agreeable than they are. [*both laughing*] And it probably has a lot to do with self-esteem. Like with many personality traits, to the extent that we're biased, the direction of our bias reflects our self-esteem. So, some people overestimate themselves, other people underestimate themselves, and that's going to predict the direction of their bias, whether we're talking about agreeableness, or extroversion, or intelligence, or anything else.

Aside: So yes, researchers can't always trust self-reporting because depending on how we feel about ourselves, we might be a little off. And, side note, I started to wonder, what is self-esteem? I never quite understood the line between confidence and arrogance, where does that lie? So I did some digging, and I happened upon an article by the

psychiatrist and author Dr. Neel Burton, who broke it down as: Self-confidence comes from the root word for trust, and self-confidence means to trust yourself, and to trust your abilities, but self-esteem is to understand your worth, so you can be confident that you can get shit done, while still feeling unworthy. You can rack up degrees, and be able to buy a big house, and have a ton of followers, and money, and be confident, but still feel like the world is out to get you, and doesn't have your best interest in mind, and you have no control, and you suck. So, arrogance steps in to fill in the gaps where there's not enough true self-esteem. And arrogance can be a symptom that someone is really thirsty for approval from the outside.

So, self-esteem, good. Where we gets this? Well, Dr. Neel Burton wrote this passage about where self-esteem comes from, which, for a *Psychology Today* blog post, was oddly profound and really beautiful. So I am going to run some royalty-free, relaxing music underneath, and that way you can just feel free to replay this as many times as you need.

[calm, serene music plays in the background]

It's no good trying to pump up the self-esteem of children, and increasingly, adults, with empty and condescending praise. Whenever we live up to our dreams and promises, we can feel ourselves growing. Whenever we fail, but know that we have given our best, we can feel ourselves growing. Whenever we stand up for our values and face the consequences, we can feel ourselves growing. Whenever we come to terms with a difficult truth, we can feel ourselves growing. Whenever we bravely live up to our ideals, we can feel ourselves growing. That is what growth depends on. Growth depends on bravely living up to our ideals, not on the ideals of the bank that we work for, or our parents' praise, or our children's successes, or anything else that is not truly our own.

Whew! So if you struggle with self-esteem, or maybe you feel like you have to puff things up and fake it, you're not alone. A lot of people struggle with self-esteem. But self-esteem doesn't rely on perfection, it doesn't require anything outside of you, but simply an appreciation for the unique little monkey that you are, trying its best. So, holy shit! I think this episode already fixed my whole life!

Okay. But let's backtrack to personality tests, since that was a question that I got so much.

Alie: You mentioned the big five and, one question that I got the most, so much from patrons that I... it's too many to even ask and it's such a big question is: What do you think about personality evaluations like Myers–Briggs, and enneagrams, and Big Five. What do you think is bullshit, what's not?

Simine: There's a lot of really good, valid measures that are free, so probably if you are paying for something you're getting screwed. [both laugh]

Simine: That's my kind of, general... I mean I think there might be some contexts where it's worth paying for a personality test that costs money, but there are so many good ones that are free that it's hard for me to imagine why someone would charge you for a personality test when you could find a free good one online. So if you Google 'big five' or 'five factor personality tests,' you can find lots of free versions that will give you feedback. And those

are pretty valid... I'm sure they're some that aren't, but there are plenty of really good, valid, Big Five measures.

Or there's another model of personality called the HEXACO, which is a six-factor model that's also quite scientifically valid. There's a little bit of a debate in academic psychology about five factors versus six factors, but I think both of those are quite valid. Meyers-Briggs, I mean, it doesn't have zero validity, but it's much, much worse than the Big Five, and it costs money, so there's really no reason to ever use the Meyers-Briggs. And its validity is quite poor, I would say. Again, it's not zero, it's not complete bullshit, but it's almost complete bullshit. [*both laugh*]

Alie: Bullshit adjacent.

Simine: Yeah. [*laughs*]

Aside: Meyers-Briggs -- officially on blast. [*DJ airhorn*] Enneagrams, by the way, outline nine personality types, and 'ennea' means 'nine' in Greek. This not to be confused with Bananagrams, which is a word game like Scrabble, but you don't need a board, and all the tiles come in a banana-shaped pouch, which was invented by a 76-year-old guy from Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Anyway, Meyers-Briggs and the enneagram tests: not necessary when you have the Big Five.

Simine: I don't judge people for finding those things fun or interesting, and I think we can learn something even from bullshit tests. I think, you know, if I take a test about, "What dog breed would you be?" I can sometimes, because of taking that test and reading the feedback, I'll end up reflecting and learning something about myself, not because the test is valid, but just because of the activity of reflecting on it.

So, I don't begrudge anyone for wanting to take those tests or enjoying them. I just think, if you're spending money on it, or you're putting a lot of weight on it, or making important life decisions because you think it's scientifically valid, I wouldn't do that. But if you find it useful, and entertaining, and maybe even it leads to self-reflection and self-insight, that's great

Aside: So, side note, I did take a "What breed of dog are you?" test, thank you very much, and it said... St. Bernard. Because I'm hard working and courageous. And then I was like, "Ooh, that went well." So I took another one. And it said chihuahua. Which "Has a lot of haters, but not to let it get me down." So then I stared into the distance in a trance of self-reflection and insight, which is exactly what the test was supposed to do.

Alie: Have you gotten really good at being able to tell someone's Big Five just, pretty quickly, like at a cocktail party?

Simine: I think we all are, actually. I think it's like, a natural human tendency. So, some of the Big Five are easier to tell than others. Extroversion's really easy to tell, actually even from a still photograph of someone, you can judge better than chance. You could too.

Alie: What!!!

Simine: Yeah. It doesn't take any special skill. Like, we looked at just, you know, undergraduates, we showed them photos of people whose extroversion level we knew from valid, measured tests, and they were better than chance at judging extroversion. Actually, same with narcissism. From a still photo, you can judge narcissism better than chance. Not perfectly, far from perfectly, but better than chance. So if you meet somebody, within five minutes you would know their extroversion level quite well.

Alie: Really?

Simine: Some other personality characteristics are relatively easy to judge, depending on the context. So if you see their office, or their home environment, you could judge their conscientiousness pretty well, because conscientiousness has a lot to do with how tidy and organized and orderly their life is, although I'm an example of when one facet of the Big Five domain... For conscientiousness, one facet is neatness, and I'm really low on neatness, you might be able to tell. My office is quite messy. [*long drawn out, "naw"*]

Aside: Her office was fine! There were some papers, a few books on the desk, but it's a desk! A desk's job is to be a horizontal service on which you pile your business shit!

Simine: But I'm high on most of the other facets of conscientiousness, so sometimes you might be misled if you just see one facet, or someone might be really assertive and so you think they are really extroverted, but actually when you see them in a social situation they're not that talkative and not that social. It's just the assertiveness that they are really high on. So sometimes you could be led astray by one strong trait when actually they're pretty low on the other traits in that cluster.

But, yeah, you can judge conscientiousness pretty easily if you see how organized and self-disciplined they are. But actually agreeableness is one of the harder ones to judge because almost everybody tends to be pretty polite and kind in a new... like when they're meeting with someone new. It takes a while before the disagreeableness comes out in disagreeable people, so that one is a little bit harder to judge. And neuroticism is also harder to judge, so that's their tendency to experience negative emotion. Most people don't wear that on their sleeve. You have to get to know them pretty well to know if they're the kind of person who gets sad, or angry, or anxious. That kind of thing.

Aside: A lot of researchers have found that you can also detect neuroticism just by listening to a person's podcast and hearing them say neurotic things.

Alie: And these are things that we can detect pretty quickly in meeting people? We're just programmed to read behaviors?

Simine: Yeah. Certainly extroversion, conscientiousness, comes across pretty quickly. I think agreeableness and narcissism you can detect once you know someone for a few weeks. I would say, you'd probably have a decent idea, and it depends how close you are to them, So like neuroticism, romantic partners are really, really accurate 'cause you see, kind of, all the emotional ups and downs, but you could be acquaintances with someone for a long time and not know that they have a tendency towards depression or something like that. So, some things could remain unknown for a long time.

But many aspects of personality are actually quite easy to judge, and we're all, kind of, experts at it out of necessity. When we go through life, we are trying to judge, would this person make a good friend? Would they make a good coworker? Should I agree to go on a vacation with this person? All that requires trying to predict their personality, what they would be like in different situations, and so on. So, by necessity, we all develop the skill to do that.

Alie: So if someone is swiping left and right, say, on a dating app, and they don't want to date an extrovert or a narcissist, can you tell? 'Cause those people are in speedos? Like on a boat or something?

Simine: That's a good question. So we actually did a study where we looked at, what is it in a photo that correlates with narcissism?

Alie: [*quietly rooting for*] Speedos. Boat. Speedos. Boat. Speedos! Boat! [*snippet of sexy, exciting saxophone solo from Baker Street song*]

Simine: It's pretty obvious once you know. So for example; wearing expensive clothes, fashionable clothes; for women, wearing a lot of makeup, showing cleavage; for men, being muscular, not wearing glasses. So generally, like, being stylish and maybe a little vain would be correlated with narcissism, and extroversion is part of narcissism. Narcissists tend to be very extroverted, very expressive, and charming, and things like that. There's good aspects to that too, obviously, so they often are quite charming, especially in first impressions, they make really good first impressions. They may actually be hard to avoid if you are on a dating app, they might be the more appealing people when you just have a photo and maybe a few words about them.

Aside: Simine notes that while she studies these personality traits, she doesn't do so at a clinical level, so she's talking about subclinical narcissism, which is just garden-variety, 'that dick at the office' types. Now, is the aim of her work to help people avoid folks who might not be right for them, or to help us all see ourselves in a way that might lead to healthier behaviors and relationships?

Simine: So yeah, my interest is... like a lot of basic research, I don't exactly know how it's going to help people yet. I think that learning what the behavioral patterns are of people high and low on narcissism, it could help us understand ourselves better, it could help us understand each other better, it could help us understand the underlying roots of narcissism. For example, I have some research showing that narcissists tend to be quite impulsive, which I think speaks to a kind of paradox about narcissists, why do they brag so much when that might undermine... you know, they're trying to make a good impression, they're trying to impress people, and they're going around telling everyone things that just make them look like arrogant jerks.

And our research suggests - and my former graduate student Ericka Carlson did some of this research too - that they kind of know that this is not the best strategy but they can't help themselves. So it's not that they are dumb, or that they think they're being really strategic, they just are impulsive and they just can't... they need you to know that they got that perfect score on the SAT or whatever.

Alie: And now, I know that the big question in personalities is nature versus nurture. What is DNA, what is ingrained in us, what is hereditary, and what is just a product of our environment? How much of personality is a result of too high of self-esteem or too low of self-esteem, or the way we were raised? Where is it coming from? [*morphed "who are we??"*]

Simine: So, the way oversimplified answer is that a lot of it is genetic and isn't how we were raised. Much of it we're born with. Now, 'much' is kind of a glass half-empty, glass half-full. There's plenty that's not accounted for by genes. There's a lot of room left over for other things to have influences, but we're having a really hard time pinning down what those other influences are. We know that genes don't account for everything. We know that personality changes throughout the lifespan, it's not fixed 100% at birth or anything like that.

There is a genetic component but there's other influences too. It's just very hard to identify what they are. It doesn't seem to be straight forward, like if you have an authoritative parent you're gonna grow up to be more organized. There's nothing quite that simple. Certainly not about parenting. You have to have pretty extremely bad parenting to change your child's personality, it turns out.

Alie: Really?

Simine: Childhood experiences probably do have an impact on personality, but not in a really straightforward way where we can say, "If you do this, your child will be more like that," which is probably disappointing for a lot of parents. Dan Engber wrote a very interesting column in *Slate* about this, about how it could also be freeing for parents to realize that as long as you are in the range of a decent parent, then exactly when you potty train your kid, or all of those decisions aren't gonna shape their personality for the rest of their lives.

Alie: Yeah, I feel like more and more, too, with the internet, more parents are so worried, like, "I gave him blueberries before the age of 3 and now they're gonna never do their homework!" or something.

Simine: Yeah, no. Right.

Alie: And how do you separate afflictions like anxiety, and depression, and ADHD, pretty common psychological afflictions, from personality? I feel like my anxiety is who I am a lot, which is...

Simine: Yeah, I'm not sure there is a clean separation. I think if you are the kind of person who has a tendency towards anxiety or depression and it's always there in the background or it always could be there, that's a part of your personality for sure. So I think we could talk about... and this is true even for extroversion. For example we could talk about whether you have a general tendency to be extroverted or whether you were extroverted today, or in the last hour, and we could talk about the same thing with depression, right? You might not be depressed right now, but you might have a tendency, or a predisposition towards depression, and you know it happens relatively frequently for you.

We call it a distinction between a trait and a state, or kind of a longer-term pattern versus a short-term, momentary experience. So, some people might not have the long-term pattern of anxiety, but have had one or two episodes of anxiety. They understand what it feels like but it's not part of their personality. I'm that way, for example, with extroversion, where I am not an extrovert, I am definitely introverted, but I have behaved like an extrovert sometimes. I know what that feels like. I can imagine it. But that doesn't make me an extrovert, just like having had one episode of depression doesn't make you doesn't make you someone with a depressive personality. But both can happen, and you could have one without the other.

Alie: Why do you think some people are extroverts and some people are introverts? And do you think people ever force themselves to be something they're not?

Simine: I think we can force ourselves to be something we're not in the short-term, like when I'm teaching I try to amp up my extroversion. Interestingly, my students can still tell that I am, by nature, an introvert.

Alie: [*laughs*] I can tell.

Simine: Yeah. Actually, I think it's really, really hard to hide. So I can "act like an extrovert," but I'm not fooling anybody. I'm just behaving in a way that's not consistent with my personality to fulfill a particular role or something like that, but everyone can still see that it's not my personality. It's just a behavior that I am doing.

Aside: So what are the signs of an extrovert? A few are: Likes to communicate by talking; enjoys group work; likes to talk about thoughts, and feelings, and doesn't mind being at the center of attention. I am literally forcing her to do all of these things right now, which is very generous and wonderful of her to oblige.

Simine: In terms of whether we could actually change in a more long-term way, not just for an hour or two, or a day, or a week, I'm pretty skeptical but I'm kind of an outlier on this. I tend to think that people... that intentional change is really hard and that we're probably better off trying to find ways to mitigate our personality or someone else's personality rather than try to change it. So, if there is something you don't like about yourself or about your partner, I think trying to create an environment where that's not going to be as big of a problem is a more productive avenue than trying to change it. Changing personality is really hard. I have a lot of friends who've tried to teach me how to be more extroverted.

Alie: Really?

Simine: In some cases really extensive, because I wanted to learn that, too. I just don't understand why it's so hard for me to talk to strangers, for example. So I remember one year I was having lunch every day in the same cafeteria and the woman who was serving the food was really, really nice to me and I felt terrible that I could never think of questions to ask her. She would always ask me questions and I could never think of questions to ask her. So I practiced with my extroverted friends and I'd be like, "What should I ask her?" And they'd give me specific questions and I could repeat those, but I couldn't think of new ones. And we would try to come up with strategies of. "Well, what would you say if it was

someone you knew well?" or, "What would you say in a situation where you're not feeling shy or whatever?" But I could never apply it in a consistent way. I might be able to one day, but not every day. I couldn't change my dynamic with her. I mean, that's just an anecdote, but I do think it's hard to change. I think extroversion might be harder than some other traits to change.

Alie: It's interesting too, 'cause in children, if a child is shy, we have so much empathy for the child, but as an adult, if you're shy, it's like, where is that empathy? "Oh! I am just shy!" You know? To have it for yourself?

Simine: Right, yeah.

Alie: And I don't know, it's interesting. I think I'm probably an extrovert, but there are definitely times where I feel like I'm forcing myself to be an extrovert, at a dinner party when I feel like the ball's gonna drop and no one's going to talk, so I'm like, "blah blah blah," you know? I don't know how much of it is adaptive and... I don't know, but ...

Simine: Yeah. I mean, we all have to do things that don't feel, like, completely consistent with our personality sometimes.

Alie: How do you think is the best way to objectivity on your own personality? 'Cause I feel like there's so much... I don't know, I feel like there is a lot of shame about our personality. Maybe everyone else can see something we can't. You know? How do people get a grip on who they are? [*morphed "Who are we?"*]

Aside: Just a casual afternoon convo about [*squeaky mouse voice "How do we get a grip on who we are?"*]

Simine: Yeah, that's really hard. There's not much research on this. So this is just, kinda my guess, my intuition. I mean, one possibility would be to ask people who you trust, but I don't think they're going to be honest with us. [*Alie laughs*]

And with good reason, right? Like, our relationships kind of depend on not being super blunt with each other about our personalities, so you might have to read between the lines. And I would be careful about putting your friends or family members in that position of telling you something because it might hurt, and it might hurt damage your relationship with them. [*clip from Beaches, Bette Midler, "But enough about me, let's talk about you. What do you think of me?"*]

So I tend not to advocate doing that very much. I think trying to find opportunities to observe yourself, so recording yourself, or watching videos, or listening to audio recordings of yourself could be really useful, especially if they're in very realistic context. Not just your answering machine recording, but like, if there was ever a conversation you had where you weren't self-conscious about being recorded but happened to be recorded, listening to that. I did that... because we use these recorders I wore one for a few days and listening to myself was fascinating.

Alie: Really?

Simine: Well, what was fascinating was that there was nothing on the recording. I would be in all these conversations where other people were talking, and I would listen to them, and I would remember what I was thinking, and so I was like, "Oh, now I am going to say this thing." And then I wouldn't say it. And I remember that I thought it, and assumed that I conveyed it somehow, but not, not audibly. *[laughs]*

Alie: Oh, wow!

Simine: So it was really good for me because I had always... People had told me that they felt like I didn't like them or they couldn't tell if I liked them. So I knew on some level that I didn't convey when I liked people, but hearing it and hearing how silent I was, I think was really good for me, to get a taste of my own medicine, of like, "why aren't I expressing this thing that I'm feeling?!" That was really useful for me.

Aside: So, if screaming "Who even am I?!" into the wind isn't working, you can DIY this EAR recorder. I looked it up, and the iEAR app they used to use isn't available in the app store anymore, but there is one made for Android. Just search 'electronically activated recorder,' EAR for android, and let your personality exploration begin. Also wear a button that warns people, and check your state laws about whether or not it's legal to record conversations. Okay, bye.

Alie: When it comes to different personalities, what do you think, from an evolutionary standpoint, is happening? Because we work together in groups, do we need a certain balance?

Simine: It could be, yeah. This is so far outside my area of expertise. My best understanding is that we don't have a good explanation. That it's kind of a paradox of evolution, like why haven't we all evolved to have whatever's the optimal personality. And one argument could be, maybe the range of personalities that we see is actually a much narrower band than what we might have seen without natural selection. We don't see a lot of psychopaths, we don't see a lot of people who are just always disagreeable all the time, right?

Like, I'm on the more disagreeable end of the spectrum and I would still like to think that most of the time I am agreeable. What distinguishes me from a really agreeable person is that I'm willing to be disagreeable or I am disagreeable sometimes. But there aren't very many people who are just always disagreeable, and that might be the result of evolution and natural selection and those people just selected out.

Alie: Yeah! We just cast them away!!

Simine: Right! They don't reproduce. *[laughs]*

Alie: *[laughs]* Banished! "You're a dick!"

Aside: When she says that we don't see a lot of psychopaths, she's right... relatively speaking. About 1% of people could clinically be considered psychopaths, while 4% are estimated to be sociopaths. We're going to get into more of this later, but back to her work on how we see ourselves.

Alie: Do you think anyone ever has a big shift in personality after getting medicated for depression or anxiety or ADHD? Would you say, like... or do you think it just uncovers their true personality to get properly medicated?

Simine: That's a good question. There's some research on whether medication or therapy changes personality, and it looks like on average it does have a small effect, like people do shift a little bit. Big shifts are really rare, but there are anecdotes or individual cases where people see big shifts after some kind of treatment, or trauma, or something like that. I think it's a deep, philosophical question whether that's their true personality coming out, or their personality has actually changed. Was it always there and it just didn't come out before? Or did it really change?

I think we should study that more often, the rare cases of really dramatic sudden personality changes. I mean, and they're hard to study because you don't know when they're going to happen, right? It's a really fascinating question.

Aside: Okay, so it is a fascinating question, and I asked the internet and it turns out that yes, getting medicated CAN change your personality, so sayeth some researchers. So, Dr. Brent Roberts, who is a professor of Psychology at the University of Illinois, and his colleagues, looked at 144 studies with over 15,000 people and they were using different kinds of interventions, from talk therapy, and meditation, cognitive behavioral therapy and antidepressants. And it turns out that without trying to change their personality traits, some changed anyway. In particular, patients with anxiety disorders who displayed a lot of neuroticism changed the most.

And then in another study, the professor of Psychology at North Western University, Dr. Tony Z. Tang, found that antidepressants like SSRIs can alter two really key personality traits linked to depression, and that's neuroticism and extroversion. So compared to placebo drugs, just a sugar pill, participants showed a drop in neuroticism, which is that tendency toward emotional instability, and bad moods, and then they had an increase in extroversion, which is a tendency to be more outgoing.

In yet another study done by researcher Alie Ward, they looked at one participant taking an antidepressant for anxiety, and found that 100% of the one participant, me, did feel less anxious and less neurotic after starting medication. [*over a phonenumber, "So can I call myself a doctor or what? No? Okay."*]

Simine: I mean, and even the more subtle changes, like all of us change a little bit as we get older and have different experiences, there's some pretty good research that suggests that things like major role changes, like getting married, or having kids, or entering the workforce, or becoming a caretaker, things like that really do have an impact on our personalities. It's not a dramatic shift overnight, but they do change our personalities a little bit. And it's an interesting question, like if you reflect on something that's changed about yourself over a few decades -- were you a different person back then? Or were you always like that but you had to grow into it? I think it's a really interesting question. Maybe not even a scientific one. I don't know that there's a scientific answer to that.

Alie: There's so many cautionary tales of, "Never trust someone who's burned you. They're going to do it again." But do people change over time? You know, if you think about people, maybe who've been incarcerated, who come out of it the other end more conscientious because of discipline or remorse. Do people change?

Simine: Yeah, absolutely people do sometimes change. It's just not the norm, I would say. So then, I think everyone has to make a decision for themselves about how willing they are to take a risk on someone who may have changed, but probably hasn't, you know? The default is that people tend to be pretty similar over time but it's too harsh to assume everyone always will be the same and no one ever changes, so you have to allow for some change. And then I think, it's a really... for me that's a really interesting challenge in life, is how many second or third chances to give people? And how open should we be to people who really want to change even if we know it's unlikely that they'll be able to? Or how much should we try to change even if we know it's going to be hard?

I think those are really personal questions that, I think, everyone has to decide for themselves. The evidence is relevant, the evidence suggests that it's hard. We shouldn't expect change to happen frequently, or easily, or quickly. So, know that and then decide what you want to do with that information.

Alie: Do you think your work changes who you have close to you in your life, or who you, kind of, give the boot?

Simine: It's kind of a chicken and egg problem, I think maybe I study personality because I've always been pretty picky about who I have close to me in my life. I think if people close to be had one complaint about me, I think it would be that I don't... I'm not very optimistic about people changing, and so sometimes that can be hard on the people close to me. And also, I'm pretty stubborn about not wanting to change myself.

[man saying, "I can change, and I will change."]

I think I'd rather try to find different ways around problems than trying to myself or trying to change someone else. And I think that... -- I don't know if my work informs that, or if I became a personality psychologist because I've always been that way. I don't know, but I have a pretty... I'm trying to soften a little bit in that because I know I'm too extreme in my view about that in my personal life.

Alie: You're like, "I have the data!"

Simine: Yeah. Right. *[laughs]* *[woman saying, "These are the receipts!"]*

But the data do show that people change. In the maturation stuff like if you enter a relationship, or you become a parent, or you gain responsibilities, you actually become more responsible and more mature, and the evidence is pretty clear. And that, I think, is something I'm trying to internalize more. My rational side, my academic side knows that's true, but in my personal life I think I tend to be like, "You're gonna be the same way as you were 20 years ago!" So yeah, it's a case where maybe I'm actually... my personal views don't match up with the evidence.

Alie: Do you ever study couple dynamics at all? Like what personalities fit better? And when you watch movies does that ever freak you out, like, "That's not gonna work! You're both extroverts!"

Simine: That's funny. I don't study it much, but there is research on that. And it turns out personality's not the most important determinant of whether couples are going to work. Values matter a lot more.

Aside: Side note to anyone asking, "What values in partnerships are ones that my partner and I should value?" I'll say them quickly; Caring about others, avoiding harm to others, seeking pleasure, personal success in life, maturity, independence in thought and action, and security. If you're like, "I hate all those values. Those values are for pansies." Then that's cool. Just find another, similar asshole, who feels the same way.

Simine: So being similar or different on personality doesn't really matter that much for whether the couple's likely to work out, but having similar values and things like that, that matters more. With personality, it's more what we call a main affect, so it's not the interaction between the two people, it's just the absolute level of personality traits that each person has. And it turns out that if either or both of the partners are disagreeable or neurotic, that makes relationships harder. Maybe they could be richer and more rewarding if they can work, I don't want to judge, but disagreeable and neuroticism tend to predict more dissatisfaction and more breakup in relationships.

Although, I have one bone to pick with relationship research, which is, they always define breaking up as a bad outcome, so when you look at... they'll talk about, like, this is a risk factor, it's a negative trait because it predicts breaking up. But to me that's not clear that it's always a bad outcome. Many people should break up, and for many people it's a positive experience and it leads to new experiences in the future that they wouldn't have had otherwise. So this assumption that the 'good relationship' is the one that stays together is a weird assumption to me in relationships research. So, I would take that... You know, just because disagreeable people tend to break up more doesn't necessarily mean that they are making worse choices. For some people breaking up might be the right choice.

Alie: Yeah, and break ups can be the best period of growth, and new haircuts, and mix tapes, and journal entries that you wouldn't have had otherwise. Is there any flimflam that you would debunk, any myths about personality that really get your goat?

Simine: I think there's a lot more mystery around personality than there needs to be, and I don't know why. I think that people think that you have to be an expert and you have to take this really convoluted test that will 'reveal' your personality. But actually, you don't have to try that hard to reveal your personality. If you ask yourself some basic questions, and think about your behavior and how people see you, and things like that, I think that you would get pretty far. I think what's really frustrating as an academic personality psychologist is that what gets popularized about personality is completely different than what's scientifically valid. There's this huge gap between what the public reads about personality

and what's actually, scientifically valid. And in trying to understand why, I think it's because the scientifically valid stuff is actually quite boring. [*male voice, "Boooring!"*]

Basically, if you want to know, well, what do narcissists do differently than non-narcissists? They brag more, and they're more vain, and you didn't need an expert to tell you that, right? Everybody could have guessed that.

Aside: [*humorously morphed*] I mean, not to brag, but, I could have guessed that. I'm pretty smart. [*chuckle*]

Simine: So, I think a lot of the more true things about personality are quite obvious and boring, partly because we all have to be experts on personality. It's not going to be these super counter-intuitive things, because we've already figured them out in the course of everyday life. I would just say personality is not that mysterious, it's not that hard to see in ourselves or in others. And if you're reading something that makes it sound like it is, like if you have to uncover something really, really deep to really know someone's personality, that's probably not true. [*male voice, "That's deep."*]

Alie: So, the fact that it's this big mystery, like we have a secret inside us, it's our personality, is probably not...

Simine: Right. For most of us, I think that's not true. There might be a few people in the world who really have fooled everyone else and their true personality is really different than how they come across, but that's extremely rare, I think.

Alie: What other challenges do you have in studying this? In terms of that gap between who we are and who we think we are?

Simine: The biggest challenge is that there's no absolute truth of the matter, right? I can't just draw blood from you and know that this is your personality. There's no direct pipeline, so that's a big challenge. Another one, I think that we struggle with as personality psychologists is that to study it quantitatively we have to put numbers on people, right? So, one common misconception is that we put people into categories. We actually don't. The best scientific evidence suggest that there is not categorical differences between people. It's all on a continuum. It's not the case that there's extroverts and then there's introverts, it's basically a bell-shaped curve and most people are somewhere in the middle. That's why things like ambivert is so popular. Or like, I keep seeing different terms for the extroverted-introvert or the introverted-extrovert. It's called being in the middle on a normal curve.

So, we don't categorize people because it turns out that's just not the shape of the distribution. It's not two boxes. It's a continuum, but we do put numbers on people, so we'll say you're in the 60th percentile on extroversion or whatever. And of course that's... we can't actually know that so precisely, it's an estimate, there's some uncertainty around that. But it still, I think, feels uncomfortable to people to put numbers on something as, kind of, rich as personality, [*"Oh, that's rich! That's really rich!"*] and to have, you know, five dimensions, and "once we have these five numbers about you, we've got you figured out," or whatever.

I think it's important to convey that I don't know any personality psychologist who actually thinks that you can describe someone in their full complexity with 5 numbers, or even with 25 numbers or 100 numbers if we go into the finer grain traits within the Big Five. But if we want to study it quantitatively we have to end up... We don't just use five numbers, we often have many, many more numbers than that, but it's still numbers. And I think that can feel very reductionistic and harsh, I think, to a lot of people. It's like, we can't completely capture someone's experience with numbers, but there's still a lot of interesting stuff we can study.

Alie: I don't see any other way around it. 'Cause what are you gonna do? You can't just have a spreadsheet full of words. You just have to translate them into something that you can compute.

Simine: Right. Yeah.

Alie: And is that part of the methodology of it? Is trying to really figure out... ?

Simine: Yes, personality psychologists spend a lot of time developing questionnaires and fine-tuning them and arguing about, like... if I ask you, "On a scale from 1-5, how often do you like to be around other people?" And 1 is never and 5 is always. We will spend hours at a conference arguing about, "Should it be a 1-5 scale, or a 1-7 scale? Or maybe it should be an even numbered scale so there's no mid-point?" And you can have all kinds of academic debates about those things, and we do.

Alie: What are those conferences like? More introverts? More extroverts? More ambiverts?

Simine: Oh, WAY more introverts.

Alie: Really?

Simine: I think introverts are overrepresented, probably in academia in general. Maybe not in psychology. I feel like the social sciences have a lot of extroverts, but within psychology, personality is a very introverted group, interestingly. I don't actually have any evidence for that, but I feel... I would bet a lot of money on that.

Alie: Very quiet cocktail hours.

Simine: Yeah. We're not the socializers of psychology. If you go if you go to a social psychology conference, there's way more talking, and socializing, and partying going on than at a personality psychology conference. We do have dance parties, but we're very... we go somewhere secluded and isolated where no one can see us and then we do our nerdy dance parties. [*"Good morning, dance party!!"*]

Aside: So can we pretend to be something we're not? This next revelation was such a surprise. And a comfort to me.

Alie: I maybe didn't realize that I had more introverted tendencies, because I just was always stuffing them down. I was like, "No! Get out there! Be social! Or else people are going to think that you don't like them!"

Simine: Yeah, and I think a lot of extroverts think that that makes them an ambivert or, you know, introverted-extrovert or whatever, but nobody's *always* extroverted. Nobody always feels

like socializing. And this idea that you get energy from socializing, nobody gets energy from socializing! It's one of the myths... one of the things that's wrong about the Meyers-Briggs, is that it makes a lot of extroverts question whether they really are extroverts when they read that. But no, you are an extrovert even if you're tired at the end of a party, or you don't always feel like talking, or... That's fine. Everybody feels that way sometimes. It's just that introverts feel that way even more.

Alie: Okay! That always sparked my curiosity, because I was like, "Who goes to a work party and is like 'I'm ready to go!'" You know?

Simine: "Let's do this thing again tomorrow!" [*both laughing*]

Alie: Yeah, exactly!

I have so many questions from patrons.

Simine: Okay.

Alie: Can I ask you some?

Simine: Yeah, of course.

Alie: Okay.

Aside: Before we get to questions from patrons, first, a few words from our sponsors of this show. One reason for doing ads is that a portion of the proceeds go to a cause that the -Ologist chooses each week, and Simine picks SIPS, the Society for the Improvement of Psychological Science, which brings together scholars working to improve methods and practices in psychological science. Anyone interested in improving psychological research is welcome to join regardless of experience. You can learn more at ImprovingPsych.org. So that is this weeks donation. And I'll put a link in the show notes. Okie doke!

Let's get to your questions.

Alie: Obviously this is something that's... Everyone has some experience with, given that everyone probably has a personality.

Simine: Everyone and their dog, literally. [*laughs*]

Alie: [*laughs*] So many people, Tina Rautio, Stephanie Broertjes, Adriana Torres, Berit Maddison, Cody Albert, Tegan Moore, Kayla Brigham, and Alexa Fuss, everyone wanted to know about psychopaths and sociopaths. What personality traits would a psychopath have, and is that a personality or is it a personality disorder?

Simine: I think you could think of it either way. Like narcissism, there's the disorder and then there's probably the sub-clinical version, the 'everyday' version. I'm not an expert on this, so I think the common factor with psychopathy and some other kind of disorders that are similar is a lack of compassion. It's a kind of very low agreeableness where people are not considerate or have... maybe some people would describe it as not having a conscience at the very extreme end. But callousness, I think, is a very common characteristic of people who are high in psychopathy. I think that is, kind of, the defining feature.

Aside: Yes. Psychopathy talk again. Simine says this isn't her field of expertise, but in looking for definitions, I'll give you a rough sketch, partly because this could be a whole episode in and of itself. The history of it is sticky, the diagnosis is sticky, different editions of diagnostic manuals don't recognize psychopathy as a clinical diagnosis. It's traditionally thought of as a personality disorder, ASPD, or anti-social personality disorder. In sociopathy, is somewhat of a less severe form, and one expert on the matter, a criminal psychologist, Dr. Robert Hare, describes sociopathy as only differing from the average person in the sense of right and wrong. But psychopathy is not having a sense of empathy or morality.

Therefore, all psychopaths are sociopaths, but sociopaths are not necessarily psychopaths. It's the old "all cacti are succulents, but not all succulents are cacti." So, some traits of psychopathy are; a lack of guilt or remorse, lack of empathy, lack of deep emotional attachments, narcissism, superficial charm, dishonesty, manipulateness, reckless risk-taking. So, there you go.

Alie: What is the difference between a personality and a personality disorder?

Simine: That's a really good question. There's a lot of debate on that. My best understanding is that it's a matter of degree rather than a matter of kind for most personality disorders. There might be some exceptions, but most personality disorders, it's not the case that if you meet the threshold for disorder you're qualitatively different than someone who's close to the threshold but doesn't cross it. For example, in the case of narcissism there are people who have diagnosable narcissistic personality disorder, and then there's people who are just really arrogant, and exaggerate a lot, and are condescending to others. And if they do that all the time in many contexts and are persistently that way every time, they might not quite reach the threshold of a personality disorder. But it is the same spectrum, they're just not as far out on the spectrum.

Alie: So there's a lot more bell-shaped curves than boxes in personalities.

Simine: Yeah. For sure.

Alie: Amber Willis had a great question: What about the birth order between siblings in relation to certain personality tests. Is it just a myth?

Simine: It's just a myth.

Alie: Really?

Simine: Yeah. So there's really good research on this. There might be tiny, tiny effects, but nothing that would be practically meaningful or detectable to us in our everyday lives. So if you think you see a pattern, it's just random fluctuations.

Alie: Oooh! That's such a surprise!

Simine: At least on personality. There might be birth order effects on other things. But on personality, there's no consistent differences.

I read this great book. It was a theory about why there should be birth order differences, called *Born to Rebel*. It's a really fascinating theoretical account. It just turns out not to be

true. But yeah, you could imagine why first-borns might have different personalities than later-borns.

Alie: Yeah, and middle kids always seem the most stable.

Aside: Hats off to all the Jan Bradys of the world, and the Malcolms in the Middle, or my sister Janelle, who always seemed to have it together more than all of us combined.

Simine: Yeah, yeah. I had the same intuition, but the evidence suggests there's nothing there.

Alie: Madalyn Rogers asks: How did the astrological signs become tied with particular character and personality traits? Is it accurate at all? Asking as a Pisces who is afraid of water.

Simine: Interesting. I'm a Pisces too.

Alie: Are you afraid of water?

Simine: I am not afraid of water. I like water. I'm afraid of deep water, but I like water.

It's funny, once I was at a party and this guy came up to me, and he was trying to hit on me, and he was like, "what's your sign? I can tell you about your personality." And I was like, "Yeah. I don't... *[laughs]* You're talking to the wrong person." And then he was like, "What's your sign?" And I was like, "Pisces," and he's like, "You're stubborn." And I was like "...Okay, but you got lucky on that one!" *[both laughing]*

But no, there is no validity to the astrological sign connection to personality. I don't know where the idea came from. That's a good question, historically.

Aside: P.S.; A little bit of digging revealed that a Japanese study found that people born December - February have lower agreeableness, i.e., kinda jerks, or at least 'charmingly assertive.' And then another study reported that summer born males were less conscientious.

But, but, but! In the 1980s a very badass, curious dude named Dr. Shawn Carlson wondered about the efficacy of astrology and conducted a double-blind experiment where he gave 24 respected astrologers 100 personality profiles and, and, and...! The study found that astrologers were unable to match natal charts to their corresponding personality tests better than chance. Carlson was like, "Hey! Astrology, y'all flimflams."

Now, I know this, and I believe in science, but does this stop me from reading Susan Miller's Astrology Zone and screen-capping it to send it to friends sometimes? No, it does not. It's free, it's fun, let me live. If Dr. Caleb Finch can enjoy Benjamin Button, then we can be entertained by a horoscope if we want. But just remember, neither are nonfiction.

Alie: Isabelle Holper asks: How can a dramatic event or the loss of someone close to you influence your personality, or can it?

Simine: It can. Again, I think most of the changes are not dramatic. I think life events have small impacts on our personality and they add up, so if you have a lot of, you know, negative events or a lot of positive events, I think that that can add up to a really big change. But usually one event, even if it's pretty dramatic, won't have a huge impact on your personality. Again, there are exceptions. We can all think of people that did change quite

dramatically in a short period of time, but that's the exception rather than the rule. So in a way it's nice 'cause we're more resilient than I think we might be afraid of.

Certainly, major negative events will have an impact for a while. And some will have an impact forever. Unemployment can have a pretty long-term impact, at least on people's happiness and well-being, which you could construe as an aspect of personality.

Unfortunately, positive events tend to have a shorter lasting impact than negative events [*sad slide whistle*] but yeah, they tend not to have a really dramatic effect.

Alie: That's interesting. Sarah Nichelle wants to know: Why does abuse makes some people kinder, and then others act like their abusers? So, why do people sway after something...?

Simine: I mean, some of that might just be their genetic predisposition or their preexisting personality before the abuse. It could be that, you know, if you were already a very considerate and kind person, that abuse might accentuate that, and that might be your coping mechanism, is to just be extra kind to everybody. And if you were someone who tended to be the opposite, then the abuse might exaggerate that. I don't know if that's empirically true, but that would explain why people react differently, if they are different to begin with. Often your baseline personality will predict how you react to an event or a situation, and it could exaggerate the differences between people.

Alie: These are such great questions, so many people; Danni Q, Maia Welbel, Kellie Windsor, Danelle Von, all kind of asked a little bit about how contagious is personality? Like, if you spend an excessive amount of time around another person, how much does it shape your personality? Is there an alpha effect, like, where there's dominance and status that changes who you are?

Simine: I think in the short term there are complementarity effects on dominance, so if I'm interacting with someone who's much more dominant than me I'm going to take a more submissive role in that interaction. And then for other personality or behavior patterns there might be the opposite effect, where you become more similar to your interaction partner. So I think, like, warmth, if you're interacting with someone who's really warm, you're going to match their warmth. It's interesting that on some things, it pulls for the opposite of what your interaction partner is like, like on dominance, and on other things it pulls for similarity.

But those are short-term effects, so it's like, in our interaction we're going to become more similar on warmth and more opposite on dominance while we are interacting. But long-term, like, if you live with somebody, the research suggests there isn't any long-term contagion of personality. You don't become more like your roommates or your partners.

Aside: So, not for the long-term, although research shows that in the short term, you re-framing things for a bummed-out friend can help them, but it might leave you feeling a little exhausted and worse about yourself. So, if you're everyone's cheerleader, way to go! But psychologists recommend taking care of yourself, setting aside a few extra moments in the day to think positive thoughts about your own circumstances. "I'm a badass who helps their friends. I'm a beacon of light in the darkness. I make pretty good lasagna. My hair looks SO good today."

- Alie:** Shea Goddard asks if you believe in 'type A' and 'type B' personality traits.
- Simine:** There's some truth to that, but I think it's oversimplified. I think that, like, the Big Five is a better model of differences between people. Type A and Type B, kind of, pushes people into, like we talked about, boxes instead of a continuum.
- Alie:** And some other people had some questions, you know, going back to narcissism. Theresa Bossenova had a great question: In the age of social media, how do you best deal with narcissistic friends. And also just in general, in our culture now, are we trending toward that because of circumstance?
- Simine:** I think the best evidence suggests there is no difference between now and previous generations in terms of narcissism or the effect of social media on narcissism. It's very easy to see. Like, you can remember specific cases of people being really narcissistic and social media exaggerating that, but I actually think that's not... There's no long-term trend in that direction, or at least the evidence isn't very clear that there is, but there's controversy around that. I mean, you could see it as a way that makes it really easy to know who to avoid because the narcissists out themselves on social media.
- If it wasn't for social media it might take a year of knowing somebody before you could really see how narcissistic they are, you know, maybe in some cases, although usually it comes out faster than that. But social media just speeds it up, right? Like, you can tell more easily, I think. The more avenues you have for someone to express themselves, the more quickly you can judge their personality more accurately.
- Alie:** Yeah, I guess it's like having access to someone's journal, pretty much. You know, straight shot into their... what they want to project and what they're going through.
- Aside:** What about public figures? [*Donald Trump: "I'm a very stable genius."*] [*Kanye West: "I am the number one most impactful artist of our generation!"*]
- Simine:** That's another thing we debate within our field, is like, is it irresponsible for us to make a professional judgment on a famous person's personality without ever having met them? And certainly, for clinicians, I think it's considered bad professional practice, but as not-clinical, just describing their personality from a scientific standpoint, I'm kind of neutral on that. I think, obviously, we can tell. I don't think personality experts have much to add to what's already obvious to everyone.
- Alie:** Lauren Chiodo wants to know: Are there anyone personality types that should be red flags?
- Simine:** It depends on your preferences. So even... we talked about narcissism. First, I would change the term 'type' to 'trait' just to go back to this whole categorical-versus-continuous thing. So, if everything's on a continuum, you know, you might like narcissistic people because they're really charming, and funny, and they're the life of the party, and they keep things interesting. Some people are fine with being in a relationship or living with someone who's high on narcissism. That's fine.

I think that you have to figure out what you're okay with. Some people couldn't ever be in a relationship with someone really introverted. That would drive them nuts, so... You know, different people have different preferences.

Aside: Maybe you couldn't love someone who loves themselves a whole bunch. Or maybe, people who seem like they *really* love themselves, are the ones who *don't* really, deeply love themselves enough, which is all the more reason to show them love. I don't know. Just everybody be nice to each other, okay? Thank you.

Alie: Eloisa Froes wants to know: Are there any personality traits associated with high performance or success? The same way that it seems to have biological correlation to high levels of testosterone and low cortisol levels, like, with CEOs and other leadership folks?

Simine: Yeah, so there are personality predictors of success. It's kind of, almost, circular. Basically, if you're conscientious, which includes being self-disciplined, and responsible, and organized, and on time, you're going to have more professional success. That's a pretty strong predictor of professional success. Pretty much across... no matter what career you're in, conscientiousness is going to be a predictor of success.

Aside: If you're like, "What does conscientiousness really mean?" Some personality psychologists had the same question. They set out to define it more concretely with a study that looked at how much certain people engaged in 11 behavioral factors, such as: Avoiding work, organization, impulsivity, anti-social behaviors, cleanliness, industriousness, laziness, appearance, punctuality, formality, and responsibility. The study was called, *What Do Conscientious People Do?* I'm guessing because the Board rejected the title: *Who has their fucking shit together?*

Simine: And then, depending on their career, other traits might or might not predict it. If you're in a sales job then extroversion is an asset. Same with teaching, extroverts get better teaching evaluations. If you're in a creative job, then being high on the Openness to Experience factor is going to be an asset, you're going to have more success. But again, it's almost circular. Like, part of being high on Openness to Experience is being curious, and creative, and open minded, so that is just part of the job description for a creative job. So yeah, different jobs will, kind of, suit different personality traits better. But conscientiousness is, kind of, the main factor that predicts success in general.

Aside: She gestured again to her office, which I am telling you, was not that messy, just some stacks of papers! Some books. From the way she describes it, you'd think there was a month-old cheeseburger on the windowsill. There was not.

Simine: But if someone figures out the neatness [*both laugh*] thing I would love to know, because I just can't, for the life of me, be neat.

Alie: There are, like, no plates of food in here. You're doing fine.

Simine: I'm not dirty, I'm just not organized.

Alie: No! You're doing fine! I'm sure you'd know... if you had to find a piece of paper, you'd know which stack it's in.

Simine: Which pile? *[laughs]*

Alie: Exactly. That's organization!

Simine: Yeah.

Alie: Any movies about personalities that annoy you, or you think are good at exploring it?

Simine: That's a good question. One movie that stuck with me, I don't remember... I don't know if I want to, like, endorse it as being accurate or anything like that, but it was fascinating to me because it's about self-knowledge is *I Heart Huckabees*.

Alie: Oh, yes!

Simine: And he hires an existential detective to follow him around. So, you asked earlier about "How should we learn about ourselves. What should we do if we want to know what our personality is like?" And I said, "Maybe, don't ask your friends." But if there was such a thing as an existential detective that you could hire to become an expert on you, and then give you feedback, that would be fascinating. I remember when I watched that movie, I was like, "If that job existed, that would be my dream job!" Just, like, follow someone around, and take notes, and then tell them, "This is what you're like!" *[clip from movie: "What kind of investigation?" "Existential" "You'll spy?" "Yes." "On me?" "Yes." "Will you be spying on me in the bathroom?" "Yes"]*

I think one thing people don't spend enough time thinking about is, "Okay, if I can't change this aspect of my personality, what can I do so that it doesn't have a negative impact on my life or on other people?" So, when I figured out that people can't tell when I like them, I learned I have to explicitly tell people, "I had a really good time last night! I enjoyed it," or, "I like you. I would like to hang out again..." or whatever, because I'm not that expressive, and so it won't come across. I haven't necessarily gotten a lot better at that, but I think that's a more viable way to change than actually becoming more expressive, for example.

Aside: A few days after this interview, I got an email from Simine, just saying, "It was great talking with you last week! I hope the rest of your visit was good! Thanks again for inviting me onto your podcast!" Which was so sweet, I was so touched.

Alie: So, just change some of your behaviors instead of your core identity.

Simine: Yeah, or like, find out what the negative consequences are of your personality traits, and then try to ward off those consequences instead of changing your personality trait. It seems a little bit more realistic to me than changing your personality.

Alie: And what is the thing that is the most irritating about your job, or the part that you hate the most? Anything from parking to, uh, something existential?

Simine: Um... *[Jeopardy theme]*

Alie: Parking, so far was the only downside I could see. *[laughs]*

Simine: *[laughs]* Yeah. Um... *[Jeopardy theme continues]*

Alie: It's good that you can't think of anything.

Simine: It's not easy. I'm trying to think, like, how into-the-weeds to get about what an academic job is like.

[*Jeopardy theme concludes*]

I mean, honestly, the most annoying part of my job is having to apply for grants. That's not fun, and part of the reason... I mean, just having to ask for money is annoying, and you constantly have to. Even if you get a grant, within a year it's going to run out soon and you have to start thinking about applying for grants again. So that's annoying, but also because it's, kind of, this weird marketing thing where you have to sell yourself, and talk about why your idea are transformative and they're going to change the world. You have to figure out how to sell your work. I don't like that aspect of it.

[*Oliver Twist: "Please, sir. I want some more."*]

Alie: What is the thing that you love about your job or your work the most?

Simine: I love the freedom to change my mind about things, or change direction. I could have been studying something for five years and then decide, "Oh, actually, I don't think that's true anymore and I'm gonna try to find the opposite." Or, "I'm just going to go in a different direction." And I love that I have the freedom to do that, that I have job stability so I can say, "my work from 5 years ago is wrong," and there's no consequences, or not a lot of consequences. So yeah, it's fun because it gives you the freedom to play with ideas, and kind of argue both sides, and figure out...

With self-knowledge, I get this a lot. Like, I'll sometimes say people are pretty good about knowing this about themselves, and then in another paper I'll say people have this blind spot. And then people will be like, "You need to choose a side! Are you for self-knowledge or against self-knowledge?!" And I'm like, "No, I don't have to choose a side and that's the beauty of it."

Aside: Are there any books on personality psychology that she recommends? She glanced at over at a bookshelf and very quickly settled on a favorite.

Simine: If they're interested in learning about personality, it's a textbook, so it's a weird recommendation, but it's such a readable textbook. *The Personality Puzzle* by David Funder. In the show *Felicity* she was carrying it around when she was in college.

[*clip from Felicity: "Dear Felicity... Here it goes. I've watched you for 4 years, always wondered what you were like..."*]

Simine: It's just... it's so much better than what you imagine when you think of a textbook. It's not dry, it has a really nice narrative voice. The author, David Funder, is really, really good at that. And it'll teach you the basics of the Big Five and other... He's actually not a huge fan of the Big Five, so it's a nice, balanced perspective on it. It won't feel like 'drinking Kool-Aid' as much as, maybe, my interview has sounded like.

Alie: [*laughs*] Nooo! No, it's... I wasn't sure if you would have faith in any of the tests, so it's really interesting to hear from your perspective, like, this one's worth it. I thought you'd, maybe, say that they're all garbage, so I wasn't...

Simine: No, there are good tests out there. Yeah.

Aside: So go forth, whether you start recording life snippets, or dive into a psychology textbook, or take a quiz, to figure out which planet you are (and yes, that quiz exists). Or maybe just ask a close confidante to draft you an honest letter on turkey stationary.

Alie: Thank you so much!

Simine: It's great. I'm glad to be on the show.

Alie: Oh, yay! I hope I didn't ask you too many questions.

Simine: No, not at all.

So remember to ask smart people stupid questions, because chances are everyone's wondering the same thing you are, especially if the question is, "What am I? What am I doing here? Am I a good person? What's happening?" The answer is; Yes. You're just a little monkey, you're doing your best.

For more of Dr. Vazire's work, you can check out *The Black Goat*, that's a podcast she hosts with two other psychologists, Sanjay Srivastava and Alexa Tullett. They have an episode called "Testing 1-2-3" all about personality tests that they love and hate, so get all up in that. That's called [The Black Goat Podcast](#). She's also Simine Vazire on [Twitter](#), and I'll put a link in the show notes to all of this.

We are @Ologies on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#), I'm [@alieward](#) on both. Come say Hi. For more links to personality tests and other stuff that we talked about, see [alieward.com](#). There's is also a link there to buy [merch](#), if you want to rep Ologies. I am not saying you have to. Also, thank you to Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch for managing that. Find them on Instagram and follow them because they are wonderful.

Thank you to Erin Talbert and Hannah Lipow for adminning the [Ologies Podcast Facebook group](#), which is as amazing as they both are. Interns are Caleb Patton and Harry Kim, and the theme song was written and performed by Nick Thorburn of the band Islands.

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And of course, lead editor, always high in agreeableness and conscientiousness, Steven Ray Morris, who hosts *The Purrrcast* and *See Jurassic Right*, two great podcasts about cats and dinos. I'll let you guess which is which.

At the end of the episode, I tell you a secret. I'm going to give you two today. Okay, I think that thing about self-esteem was truly a revelation, and I hope this fix in my brain my outlook about self-compassion lasts because it's dope. Also, I'm starting to like vegan cheese more than regular cheese, and I think that the melty texture is less greasy and more stretchy. This is a statement, it's not an invitation for debate, thank you. Good day.

Hearts and hugs, ol' Dad Ward VonPodcast saying Over and Out. Berbye.

[outro music]

Transcribed by Azalia Worden.

Some links which may be of use:

[Ooooh, Henry Murray: a vintage semi-problematic person?](#)

[How the EAR h-ears you:](#)

[The EAR in an era of mics and cameras:](#)

[Your phone isn't NOT listening to you:](#)

[Banagrams inventor](#)

[What kind of sandwich are you?](#)

[What 90s cartoon series are you?](#)

[What piece of Ikea furniture are you?](#)

[Are you a Robin Williams genie or a Will Smith genie?](#)

[Which Meghan Markle are you?](#)

[Your choice in late night snacks will reveal your dominant personality type](#)

[Which BuzzFeed quiz are you?](#)

[Changing who you are from the bottom-up](#)

[Incidental personality change with intervention](#)

[Being so EXTRAverted](#)

[If you're into psychopathy, this guy's got you covered](#)

[What doggo are you?](#)

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[Beautiful blog by Neel Burton](#)

[The Personality Puzzle textbook by David C Funder:](#)

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