How was Richard Hatch able to win Survivor's first season? Vivian Zayas explores aspects of Hatch's personality that allowed him to succeed. Zayas explains the complexities of how personalities and situations interact to give rise to individuals' behaviors. On that analysis, Survivor provided a highly favorable situation in which Richard Hatch's distinctive personality could lead him to victory.

Outwit, Outplay, and Outlast
What Role Did Richard Hatch’s Personality Play in His Victory as the First Survivor?

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Perhaps what captivates us most about the show Survivor is that remarkably, despite all the outlandish situations that participants encounter (when was the last time you ate roasted rat for lunch?), the show parallels real life. So, when Colleen asks Richard Hatch and Kelly Wiglesworth in the finale of the first season, “For myself and for future players of this game, what three character traits do you think got you where you are and you think are essential and important to be where you are at this point?”, the question goes beyond the game of Survivor. Colleen might as well have been asking what character traits or aspects of one’s personality help a person succeed in life, and conversely, what aspects might contribute to one’s failures. Perhaps attempting to answer Colleen’s question will provide insight on the role of personality in the game Survivor as well as its role in real-life situations.

The rules of the game are simple: outwit, outplay, and outlast the fifteen other contestants in order to be the last lone Survivor and to walk away with 1 million dollars at the end of the season. Arguably, to survive, one needs to have the physical and mental abilities to win the Immunity Challenges that exempt one from having votes cast against oneself in
Tribal Council. Initially, the contestants work together in teams to win the Challenges. Halfway through the game, the two tribes merge and the game shifts to individual competitions, making every person fend for him- or herself. In addition to physical and mental abilities, surviving requires a high degree of social skill. Every three days, the Tribal Council meets and one member gets voted off the island. So, one needs to be skilled in social interaction in order to form social and personal bonds with individuals with whom one is simultaneously competing with and against. This is particularly important after the merge, when a Tribal Jury of voted-off members begins to form. Each week they return to watch the Tribal Council ceremony. At the end of the game, the Tribal Jury votes for one of the members of the final two to win 1 million dollars.

Here is where the puzzle lies: Richard Hatch, the winner of the first season, was not the most physically able of the contestants. In fact, out of the twelve individual Challenges, he only won one. Richard was also not the most liked. He was perceived as arrogant and overly confident, and even picked by some to be one of the first to get voted off the island. So, at least at the surface level, it is difficult to pinpoint what particular characteristics contributed to his success. This essay will apply modern-day research and theory in personality psychology to explore whether and how Richard’s personality contributed to his success in the first season of the show Survivor.

WHAT IS PERSONALITY?

Before trying to understand what personality characteristics contributed to Richard’s success, we first have to take a moment to think about what we mean by “personality.” Imagine asking a good friend the question “What is personality?” The first thing you might notice is that the question makes sense. The friend doesn’t look at you in a perplexed manner and say “Personality? What’s that?” This is because intuitively most people believe that personality exists and also have certain beliefs about the role of personality in everyday life.

Your beliefs about personality are most likely based on your perceptions, which are subjective, at times biased and incomplete, and with some frequency lead to faulty conclusions. On the other hand, your
beliefs are based on a multitude of personal observations and, most of the time, they are very effective in helping you understand other people's behaviors and intentions and figuring out “What makes a person tick?” This is where personality psychology comes into the picture. Personality psychology is the scientific study of the individual and systematic differences between individuals. Instead of relying on subjective beliefs, intuitions, and assumptions, personality psychologists use the scientific method to test hypotheses about the structure and processes of personality. Like other disciplines, personality psychologists use the tools of science, such as research designs and methodologies, statistical tests, and empirical data to build a theory about the psychology of the individual. What many people might be surprised to learn is that psychologists have had long and heated debates about what personality is, what it predicts, how it interacts with one's environment, and at one time, whether it even exists!

Despite differences in perspectives, a shared assumption among personality psychologists is that each person possesses a personality—the unique and stable psychological characteristics of a person that describe and explain his or her consistent patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving. Each individual's personality is the culmination of his or her genetic makeup, biology, early life experiences, learning, and culture. Therefore, no two people have the same personality. Even monozygotic (identical) twins who share the same genetic material encounter different environmental influences and will develop distinct personalities.

THE ROLE OF SITUATIONS ON BEHAVIOR

Although one's behavior may be influenced by personal characteristics, a person is also profoundly influenced by the particulars of his or her environment. In fact, when the creators of Survivor devised the Immunity and reward Challenges, as well as the bounty given to the victors, they capitalized on this idea. They knew, for example, that eating live maggots would elicit strong reactions of disgust and repulsion for all contestants, whereas eating an eight-course catered dinner over candlelight would be highly desired.

A recurrent controversy in the study of personality has been coined
the “person vs. situation” debate (Ross and Nisbett 1991). It centers on the question: To what extent is a person's behavior influenced by his or her personality versus situational factors? Although most psychologists adhere to a view that lies somewhere in the middle—acknowledging that both the characteristics of the person and the situation influence behavior—one goal of personality psychology has been to isolate the contribution of personality on an individual’s behavior.

THE CONTESTANTS SHAPE THEIR SITUATIONS

A difficulty in teasing apart the effect of personality from that of the situation is that the two are intricately intertwined. People continuously shape—actively and passively, knowingly and unknowingly—the situations they encounter in the future (e.g., Buss 1987). For example, people select certain people (and not others) to be their friends and lifelong partners, they select certain professions and hobbies, and they select certain activities (and not others). Even when people aren’t actively shaping their environments, their personal and physical qualities—especially those that are clearly visible to others—heavily influence how people will respond to them. Finally, on those occasions when people encounter what appears to be the same situation, they shape their situation by how they interpret and react to it. Ultimately, what is most predictive of what a person will do is based not on the “objective” situation, but on the “psychological” one (i.e., how the person interprets the situation).

Most fascinating are personality-situation linkages; the situations that a person creates for him- or herself reflect something about his or her personality. An example is that of an extremely sociable person, like Gervase Peterson, the charismatic member of the Pagong tribe. Compared to someone who was less sociable and outgoing (like Rudy Boesch, the ex-marine), Gervase encountered many more situations that involved socializing with others. For example, to relax, Gervase played cards and chatted with teammates. Because of his outward-directed energy and lighthearted demeanor, other members of his tribe also sought his company.
Arguably, the show *Survivor* is an ideal opportunity for examining the interplay between personality and the situation in a naturally occurring setting. Sixteen people were abandoned in the middle of the South China Sea off the coast of Borneo, a desolate island. Each participant faced a seemingly similar situation: adapt to island environment, create a new civilization, meet physical and mental challenges, navigate social relationships, and attempt to be the last lone Survivor. Each was allowed to bring onto the island only one personal item. But the most important thing that they brought to the island was themselves. What personality factors made some people successful at the game and others not?

**THE ALLIANCE**

Any analysis of why Richard was successful in the first season of *Survivor* has to involve some discussion of the alliance he formed. Forming the alliance, and deciding whom to include and exclude in it, was a critical strategy for playing the game. By building a voting bloc, the members of the alliance simultaneously ensured that each of them would not be voted off the island and that they would decide, by coordinating their votes, who would be voted off. It was this alliance that propelled Richard into the finals. And the members of the alliance, although originally bonded by their pursuit of self-interests, developed what appeared to be genuine feelings of trust and positive regard toward one another. So, even when the alliance disbanded toward the end of the season, bonds between members lingered, giving Richard a two-vote advantage over Kelly in the final deciding vote.

The alliance that Richard formed effectively had an enormous impact on the game because it shaped the situations that every contestant on the island faced. By controlling who got voted off, the alliance minimized the effect of each individual's personal characteristics. For example, it didn't really matter if someone was liked, the most intelligent, or the most physically able. What mattered most was whom the alliance viewed as a potential threat to be eliminated.
The fact that Richard was the mastermind behind the formation of the alliance was not an accident. It was a reflection of his personality. As mentioned earlier, people shape the situations they encounter, and the situations they create for themselves both reflect and reinforce their personal characteristics. What aspects of Richard’s personality contributed to the formation of the alliance and thereby led to his success on the show?

**Trait Approaches**

From the first episode of season one, you, like other viewers and like the contestants themselves, started forming an impression of each of the participants on the show. For example, given the physical nature of the reward and Immunity Challenges, you may have been very aware of the physical attributes, such as age, gender, race, and attractiveness, of each of the contestants. Perhaps you were not surprised when Sonja, the oldest woman on Tagi, stumbled in the first reward/Immunity Challenge—a mistake that arguably caused her team to lose the first Challenge and which resulted in her expulsion from the tribe at Tribal Council. You might have also learned other general information about each contestant, such as his or her hometown, occupation, whether he or she was married and had children, and so on. You quickly learned that Rudy Boesch was an ex-marine, that Jenna Lewis had twin daughters, that Richard Hatch was a gay corporate trainer, that Sue Hawk was a trucker from Waukesha, Wisconsin, and that Dirk Been was a devout Christian.

In these initial encounters, you started forming an impression of each contestant’s personality based on the general information that you learned, but also by observing how each person behaved in those first moments on the island. Take, for instance, Ramona Gray, the twenty-something, black, female chemist who worked for a New Jersey pharmaceutical company. Because she was sick from the instant she landed on the island, you might have quickly formed an impression of her as weak, physically and mentally, and unable to carry her own weight. You also might have taken an immediate liking to Gervase, who chose playing cards as his one personal item, was always smiling, laughing, and telling jokes, and generally was easy to get along with. In contrast, Rudy immediately came across as “crotchety” and rubbed the women of his own
tribe the wrong way by incessantly telling them what to do.

In a basic way, you’ve just formed an impression of the Survivor contestants using a trait approach of personality. A significant contribution of the trait approach is that it provides a taxonomy for describing people using a small set of broad traits. Traits are a general predisposition to engage in certain behaviors. One dominant framework within the field, called the Big Five (e.g., John 1990), assesses people on five traits: 1) openness to new experiences (e.g., intellectually curious, artistic, imaginative, daring); 2) conscientiousness (e.g., persistent, dependable, meticulous, achievement-oriented); 3) extraversion (e.g., outgoing, sociable, assertive, spontaneous); 4) agreeableness (e.g., cooperative, good-natured, trusting); and 5) neuroticism (e.g., emotionally reactive, tense, insecure, jealous). (A handy mnemonic for remembering these five traits is OCEAN.)

A central idea of this approach is that traits strongly influence how a person behaves across a wide range of situations and over time. For example, imagine that the contestants completed the Big Five personality inventory and that Richard had scored high (relative to other people) on the conscientiousness dimension, which taps into goal-directedness, self-reliance, and attention to detail. A trait theorist would predict that Richard would be highly conscientious in a variety of situations—e.g., during the reward/Immunity Challenges, at camp, and at Tribal Council.

WHO IS RICHARD HATCH?

Based on the first few days on the island, how would you describe Richard? Perhaps what struck you the most about Richard was that he came across as arrogant, condescending, and as a “know-it-all.” Using the Big Five factors, perhaps you judged Richard as moderate on extraversion, high in conscientiousness and openness to new experiences, and somewhat low on neuroticism and agreeableness (certainly his tribe thought he was disagreeable when he lounged around the camp naked). You might have even thought, based on the interaction that occurred when the Tagi tribe initially landed on the island, that Richard was not going to fare very well on the show. Recall that he attempted to rally the group to discuss logistics, such as where to set up camp; but Rudy, the
self-appointed expert on the matter given his experiences as a marine, quickly took over the conversation. At this time, Richard also attempted to convene a meeting to discuss the “process” of what the tribe was going to do, how they were going to do it, and why they were going to do it. The rest of the tribe, exhausted, hungry, and eager to set up camp, were not receptive to Richard or his corporate managerial style and they quickly dismissed his ideas. He was left sitting by himself on a tree, while the others walked away chuckling, saying, “We’re done talking.”

In a sense, the trait approach to personality describes people much like how you might describe someone you meet for the first time. The impressions formed are broad and general. So, knowing that Richard is high on conscientiousness does not seem to answer Colleen’s question—what characteristics make a person successful on the show Survivor? Nor do such broad characterizations seem to account fully for the complexity of people’s behavior.

**GOING BEYOND TRAITS**

Even though traits provide information about what a person is generally like across a wide range of situations, a lot still remains unknown. A problem with solely using traits as a means for predicting success on the show Survivor (or in other life domains) is that it doesn’t appreciate the effect of the situation on behavior; the extent to which a trait is beneficial, adaptive, and advantageous will depend in part on the situation. Take, for example, the trait conscientiousness. Conscientiousness is typically considered a positive and highly desirable characteristic and has been shown to predict job performance in a variety of different occupations (Barrick and Mount 1993). But although it may serve a person well at work, conscientiousness, which encompasses the ability to control one’s impulses for the sake of pursuing one’s goals, is not always desirable, and in some instances may be unrelated or even negatively related to successful outcomes. So, what is important is not necessarily being high in conscientiousness in general, but being conscientious in the most appropriate situations (e.g., when planning who is going to run which leg of a race, but not necessarily when relaxing with teammates at camp).

A related point is that the trait approach describes how a person is in
general, regardless of the situation he or she is in. In real life, however, a person’s behavior varies from situation to situation (Mischel and Shoda 1995). For example, Richard was highly conscientious, persistent, and diligent in season one of Survivor. He never stopped thinking about ways to secure his place in the tribe and avoid getting voted off the island. But this doesn’t necessarily mean that he was always conscientious. In one of the final Challenges, Rudy, Kelly, and Richard had to have one hand touching a wooden pole-like idol at all times. The one who remained standing without letting go of the idol won immunity, ensuring a berth into the final round. The winner would also single-handedly decide which of the two losing contestants would be voted off the island. Something remarkable happened in this Challenge: Richard, who had persisted in so many previous Challenges and situations and who had been doing everything in his control to win, let go of the wooden idol after only two hours. It was not an accident (like it was when Rudy made the “million dollar mistake” and unintentionally let go)—it was deliberate.

Because traits describe general behavioral tendencies and do not take into account the particulars of the situation, they are not always the best predictors of what a person will do in a particular situation. They can’t, for example, explain why Richard let go of the wooden idol.

SOCIAL-COGNITIVE APPROACHES

Why did Richard let go of the wooden idol after he had been persistent in other situations? A goal of social-cognitive approaches (Mischel and Shoda 1995) to personality is to answer questions of this kind, specifically, to understand why a person behaves one way in one situation and in a seemingly contradictory way in another situation.

According to social-cognitive approaches, the fact that Richard’s behavior varied across different situations reflects something about his personality that goes beyond traits. His behavior reflects, for example, how he interpreted and construed the particular Challenge, including the strategies that he saw available to him at that time and his evaluation of his abilities as well as the abilities of Rudy and Kelly. For example, Richard might have perceived Kelly as an athlete and fierce competitor,
and with good reason. Kelly had won the last three Immunity Challenges, which had protected her from getting voted off the island. Winning the Challenge against Kelly would not have been a small feat for Richard. Richard’s alliance with Rudy also probably figured prominently in his decision. If either Rudy or Richard won the Challenge, they both would go to the final round and Kelly would be voted off. But perhaps Richard thought that this was not the best situation. At this point in the season, Rudy was better liked than either Richard or Kelly. Richard might have calculated that the Jury would vote in favor of Rudy and that it was in his best interest to be in the final with Kelly. He might have also thought that it was in Kelly’s best interest to be in the finals with Richard, and took a gamble that she would think the same.

In contrast to trait approaches, social-cognitive approaches focus on how “person variables” affect behaviors. Person variables refer simply to how a person thinks about a situation, including themselves and the people in it; for example: how one interprets the situation, expectations about outcomes in particular situations, emotional responses to particular events, one’s goals, and the strategies and abilities one has available to achieve desired outcomes.

What implications do social-cognitive approaches have for understanding Richard’s success on Survivor? First, person variables—because they essentially reflect how a person thinks about a situation—have a profound effect on what a person does in a particular situation, and account for why different people respond differently to a seemingly similar situation. Perhaps the best example of how individual differences in interpreting a situation influence what people do is how the contestants themselves differed in their interpretation of the game of Survivor, the rules, and how it should be played. At one point during the season, Richard said, “I arrived on this island at the same time as everyone else. We all saw the sign that said ‘Survivor—outwit, outplay, outlast.’ That’s what I’ve been trying to do since before I even got here, and the other fifteen people seemed to think they were on vacation.” His interpretation of the game undoubtedly affected how he approached the game and the strategies he used, including the formation of the alliance. He arrived on the island armed with strategies as to how to play and be successful. Even though the other contestants were given the same information, they construed the game differently. As a
result, they were ill-prepared to play \textit{Survivor} as a game of strategy.

A second key point of social cognitive approaches is that person variables (e.g., strategies, expectations, abilities) are sensitive to the particular situation a person is in and therefore help explain why a given individual may behave in what appears to be contradictory ways from situation to situation. For example, the strategy Richard used in the wooden idol Challenge was strikingly different than the persistence he showed in the previous Challenge in which contestants had to stand on a wooden bar.

Finally, approaches to personality that incorporate psychologically important features of situations highlight the point that success in one situation, such as on the show \textit{Survivor}, is not necessarily related to success in other situations or areas of one’s life. Some contestants were successful in their respective professions: Ramona was a chemist and Sean was a doctor, and each had demonstrated the strategy and ability to be successful at work. Yet, when it came to \textit{Survivor}, they were unsuccessful. Ramona did not have the physical stamina, and Sean, who chose to vote off members based on the order of their name in the alphabet, was naïve about the strategy and mental aspects required to play the game successfully. Similarly (but with opposite outcomes), Richard—who was successful at \textit{Survivor}—ended up serving time in jail for tax evasion. Clearly, the skills and strategies he used to succeed in the show led to drastically different outcomes in his personal life.

**WHAT ROLE DID PERSONALITY PLAY IN RICHARD’S SUCCESS IN THE FIRST SEASON OF \textit{SURVIVOR}?**

The idea that personal characteristics play a role in one’s successes and failures in life is relatively unquestioned. But what are those characteristics, and are those the same characteristics needed to be successful in the game \textit{Survivor}? Certainly, a person’s behaviors (and associated successes and failures) are determined by a host of factors: his or her traits, the adaptiveness of his or her response to specific situations, his or her goals, and the situations, including people in them, that he or she encounters.

So what role did personality play in Richard’s \textit{Survivor} success?
Personality psychologists have long attempted to tease apart the effect of personality from the effect of the situation on a person's behavior. The problem with this approach is that the two are intricately intertwined. A key part of personality is the situations that a person creates for him- or herself. The formation of the alliance in the first season of *Survivor* was a manifestation of critical aspects of Richard's personality—i.e., his goals coming into the show, how he interpreted the game, his strategies, and his abilities. The formation of the alliance was particularly diagnostic of Richard's personality because at that time no one had played the game before him. Richard and the fifteen other contestants did not have the luxury that later contestants had of seeing successful strategies and lessons learned from previously played games. They were the first to play, and as a result, one could see how their unique personalities influenced how they played.

Finally, although Richard's personality made him successful in *Survivor*, it doesn't necessarily mean that these characteristics led to successful outcomes in other domains. Many aspects of personality are context-sensitive, and this explains why Richard was able to be successful on the show but not necessarily successful in his post-*Survivor* life. In the first season—in the specific context, at the specific time, with the specific individuals he competed against—Richard Hatch used the most adaptive and beneficial strategy, the formation of the alliance, to outwit, outplay, and outlast his fellow contestants. These qualities—the way he interpreted the game and the strategies he saw available to him—are central to contemporary theories of personality that go beyond traits, and account for the complexity of people's ever-changing behavior.

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