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Sam Gosling, a popular college psychology teacher, advocates in Snoop a special brand of voyeurism, termed “Snoology,” to discern a person’s personality by examining the traces they leave behind in their personal spaces, be it in their bedroom or their office at their workplace. Expert snoopers look at the remnants people display in their personal environments to evaluate:

- identity claims—either directed toward others or the self, for instance the front yard and the backyard of a property
- feeling regulators—used to manage emotions and thoughts, such as visual (pictures) and auditory (music) stimulation, or framed degrees/awards in an office
- behavioral residues—left by everyday actions such as a spoiled coffee cup, a log on a desk or an unwashed desk area

A person’s personality, the author says, is an individual’s unique pattern of thinking, feeling, and behaving that is consistent over time and presumably related to the three dimensions noted above. Gosling embraces a trait approach, which he says most personality researchers favor, focusing on “OCEAN” traits: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

Gosling initiated research in his graduate school years on how personality is expressed in everyday life, looking for clues by snooping in bedrooms and offices. In Snoop, he connects how a person behaves in different contexts (for example, how they furnish their bedroom or how they organize their office), to what traits are revealed on measures of personality determined by the OCEAN scales.

He provides “field guides” for four domains and concludes that relatively few OCEAN traits are reliably manifest in each:

1. Bedroom—O and C
2. Office space—O, C, and E
3. Walking style—E and C  
4. Photographs—O, E, and A

A fifth table, “Blob analysis,” matches seven different domains of measurement—Facebook, website, bedroom, office, music top 10, social behavior, and short meeting—for the five OCEAN categories. This table shows, like the four field guides, that openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion are easier to spot than agreeableness and neuroticism across domains. And some domains provide more information than others— websites generally give a better view of someone than bedrooms or offices do.

He argues that the trait approach to personality is different from the “types” or “system” approach to personality. An example of the latter, the Myers–Briggs System, generates sixteen possible types of personality, such that a given person falls into one of the sixteen types and not any other. By contrast, the big five or OCEAN method gives everyone a score on each of the five dimensions. He also contrasts OCEAN to picture story exercise (PSE) measure, an outgrowth of the earlier Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) of Henry Murray, both of which measure deeper layers of personality and identity.

Gosling states that the five OCEAN traits are superficial aspects of a person when compared to more rooted elements of personality—goals and needs, hopes and dreams, that is, the richer aspects of personality, which provide contextual details missing from traits. These include roles, goals, skills, and values. A third level of personality—identity—is the inner core of the self, integrating the past, present, and future, and giving life unity, purpose, and meaning, and thereby making sense of how the past merges with the person that exists in the present.

Gosling’s second and third levels of personality, in contrast to more superficial traits, may be more closely related to commitments, integrating foci or nodes of meaning, and intensive concerns with extensive effects, per Bailey’s definition of implicit religion. As such they become characteristics of the individual’s faith at the center of their way of life and being. Gosling says he is not explicitly religious and would probably agree that Bailey’s dimensions are more connected to the deeper sense of the person and his world views than are OCEAN traits.

In sum, Gosling’s book provides the interested reader with an overview of the study of personality, noting both schools of thought and research instruments. His writing style is engaging. Indeed his snooping and sleuthing techniques (reminiscent of the cited fictional detectives Sherlock
Holmes and Hercule Poirot), have found a responsive audience in college classrooms and some American television programs. His methods can be surreptitiously applied by students—without the encumbrance of human subject protocol committees!

At least since Galen, an ancient Greek who developed an early theory of personality differences based on body humours or fluids, humankind has been interested in how to detect the inner workings of other people, and what values and principles they hold dear. Gosling cleverly provides a self-administered test of the OCEAN traits in an early chapter, for readers to measure their own traits, before learning how to sneak around and pry into others’ innards.

In the first part of the second decade of the twenty-first century, there has been much discussion about the US government’s NSA (warrantless) surveillance controversy, in which phone calls are listened to, if not bedrooms peered into. Almost a century ago, in 1929, US Secretary of State Henry Stimson said “Gentlemen do not read each other’s mail.” But of course they do, and Gosling addresses their curiosity with aplomb.