

# The Enneagram and personality development

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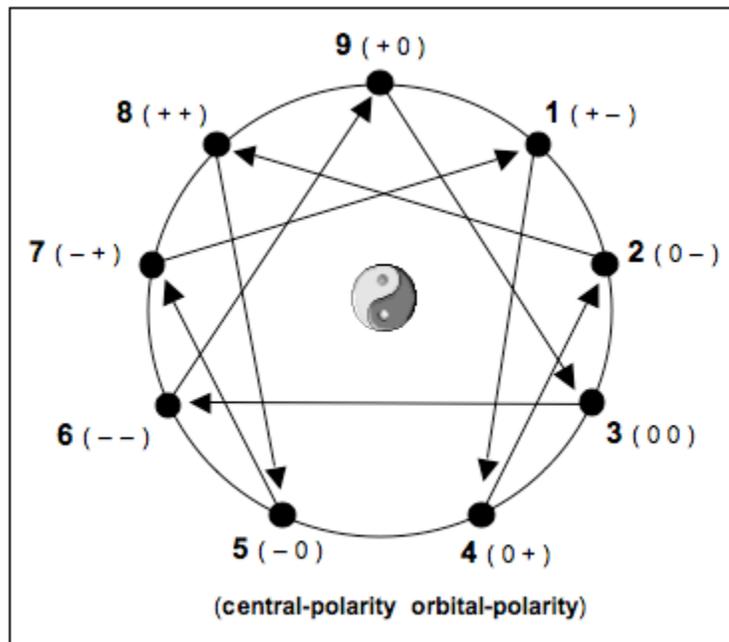
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## The dynamic Enneagram

The points of the Enneagram represent the nine equilibrium configurations that can exist between two interacting force fields. One of the forces is *central*, or *dominant*, while the other is *orbital*, or *secondary*. Each of the fields has a *polarity*, which can have one of three values:

- + activating, controlling, changing, dominating, leading, asserting, positive, expressing, yang
- responding, complying, adapting, relating, following, yielding, negative, listening, yin
- 0 neutral, uninvolved, avoiding, ignoring, inattentive, withdrawing, disengaged, detached

The same polarity pairs are always associated with the same point on the diagram, with the polarity of the central field being notated on the left. The arrows connect to *alternate* polarity configurations that the two fields can assume under certain conditions.



## Beginning from first principles

Let's assume we are unaware of the Enneagram personality typology. Our goal in this article is to see what the dynamic Enneagram model can tell us about personality development. From these first principles we will re-discover the basic Enneagram typology. Not only that, we will discover subtle aspects of personality development that may not have been noticed before.

## Karen Horney's three-primary-approaches model

Horney's model, that we each have an innate tendency to approach others with one of three stances, gives us an obvious hook from personality into the dynamic Enneagram paradigm. A parent and child during the formative years are certainly two interacting energy fields, and Horney's *against*, *toward*, and *away* clearly align with the general interpretations of (+ – 0).

We'll need to make a simplifying assumption. We'll assume that a child, in its formative years, has a *primary parental relationship*. That is, we'll assume we can think in terms of a *parent*, whose influence is primary in the development of a child's personality. This is a bit like assuming there's no air resistance or friction in Newton's laws of motion. It isn't ever quite true, but it's close enough that it leads to a very useful model nonetheless.

In order to simplify the language, I'll use male gender for the child and female gender for the parent. We'll be considering the dynamics of each relationship type, and seeking to understand how the child could be expected to behave under usual circumstances in the relationship.

## The nine types of parent-child relationships

### The (+) parent

This parent tends to dominate the child, and seeks to guide his development. The parent has expectations and rules that she wants the child to conform to. Her focus is more on controlling the child and conditioning his behavior than on creating an emotionally close relationship. The parent wants a strong relationship, but on the parent's terms.

#### Relationship type 8 (+ +)

The (+) child tends to rebel against the attempts to control and condition him. He has own agenda and needs, and he'll seek to assert them. In seeking his own autonomy, he'll develop confrontational skills through his ongoing struggles with this parent. He'll experience the relationship as a power struggle, and he'll seek to gain dominance in the relationship.

Struggle for power will characterize the relationship, and the child will come to see *seeking dominance* as a primary virtue, necessary to avoid being dominated by others.

#### Relationship type 1 (+ –)

Rather than rebelling against control, the (–) child experiences the parental energy as a basis for relating to the parent, and will seek to conform to the parental expectations. Basically, he's in orbit around the parental energy field: that's his basis of stability. He will be a generally obedient child, always aware of what rules are in play, and will see being good as a primary virtue, necessary for maintaining stability in life.

The child will feel constrained in his behavior, being always concerned with following the rules. He will regard personal impulses contrary to the rules as temptations that a good boy resists. He will feel guilty when he yields to such temptations, and he will feel resentful toward any sibling who breaks the rules, gets by with it, and doesn't even feel guilty.

#### Relationship type 9 (+ 0)

The (0) child would be unlikely to rebel against or conform to the controlling parental energy. This child will seek to avoid or ignore the attempts at control. The parent will persist, disturbed by the lack of response, and the child will tend to withdraw into himself to avoid emotional upset.

In responding to the parent, the child will seek to appease her, to escape from the pressure, or may simply seek to avoid the parent altogether. The relationship will be a strained one and the child will see avoiding conflict as a primary virtue, necessary for surviving in life.

## The (-) parent

Rather than seeking to control and condition the child, this parent wants to relate to him, to respond to him as he is. Like the (+) parent, this parent wants a strong relationship, but she wants the relationship to be close, and to be on terms acceptable the child.

### Relationship type 7 (- +)

The (+) child will tend to thrive in the field of this responsive parental energy. With an innate tendency to self-expression, reinforced by parental approval and appreciation, the child will relish time spent with the parent. The child will seek to prolong such interactions, and will become skilled at entertaining and amusing the parent with his own cuteness, cleverness, and tales of his activities.

The child will grow accustomed to being the center of attention, and will see being entertaining as a primary virtue, necessary for being appreciated in life.

### Relationship type 6 (- -)

The (-) child will have a very close relationship with this parent. They will be sensitive to one another's moods, and responsive to one another's needs. The child will be disturbed whenever the relationship goes off track, and will become skilled at maintaining harmony in the relationship. The child will see maintaining harmony as a primary virtue, necessary for achieving stability in life.

### Relationship type 5 (- 0)

The (0) child will feel a bit overwhelmed by the ongoing pressure of this parent's responsive energy. The child doesn't relish being in the limelight, and will be uncomfortable with the praise and appreciation he gets for every little thing he does. In general he will see the parent as interfering too much.

The child will learn to conceal what he's up to and what he's thinking about, in order to avoid unwanted attention and to maintain his personal space. He will see seeking privacy as a primary virtue, necessary for maintaining one's equilibrium in life.

## The (0) parent

This parent is focused more on her own life than on the relationship with the child. She resents the constant demands of the infant, and is relieved as he learns to take care of himself. She encourages his independence and is quite happy when he's off on his own doing whatever he does, as long as he doesn't get into too much trouble.

### Relationship type 4 (0 +)

The (+) child tends to feel abandoned by the inattentive parent, and when he tries to get her attention in his assertive way, he doesn't get much response. He finds himself on his own a good deal of the time, and he tries to compensate for the lack of emotional support by seeking satisfaction in his own self-initiated activities.

He is very unrestrained in his behavior – as long as he doesn't cause a disturbance of some kind, he can get by with pretty much anything. He comes to prefer his independence, where he can freely express himself through his activities, and develop some sense of fulfillment in his life.

At the same time, he yearns for emotional support, which his tendency toward unrestrained independence is unlikely to foster. He feels insecure in the relationship with the parent, and sees expressing freely as a primary virtue, necessary to secure some degree of fulfillment in life.

### Relationship type 2 (0 -)

The (-) child, being responsive to the energy of the parent, will soon figure out that the parent is not specifically ignoring him, but simply has her own concerns to deal with. He wants a relationship with the parent, and he will become aware of her routine – seeking ways to make himself useful and welcome in her space whenever he can.

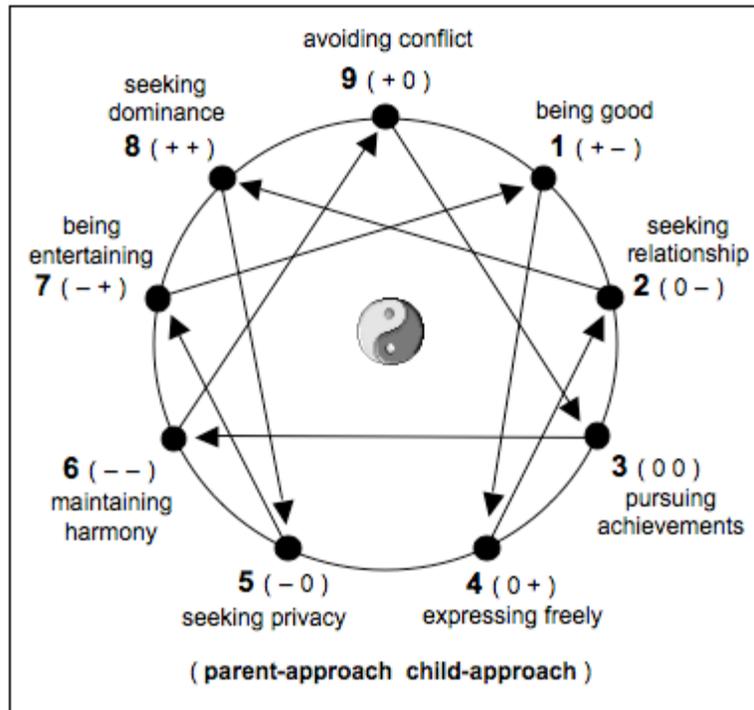
He is focused on the parental relationship, and gains experience in maintaining the relationship under varying circumstances and through times of conflict. He is not deterred if a response is not forthcoming, but knows that an investment in consideration is likely to be rewarded eventually. He sees seeking relationship as a primary virtue, necessary for finding security in life.

**Relationship type 3 (0 0)**

The (0) child, being happy on his own, is comfortable with the parent's inattentiveness. He pursues his own activities, has plenty of time to himself, and is content most of the time. When he does something special, or achieves something, his parent is pleased to hear about it. She is happy that he is doing well on his own, and is glad to take a bit of time to appreciate and congratulate.

The child is thus rewarded for achievements, and requires little else to maintain his equilibrium, as achievements are satisfying to himself as well – as with the type 4 child. The type 3 child, however, is not burdened by the emotional yearning of the 4. The 3 child sees pursuing achievements as a primary virtue, not as a compensation for anything, but as a natural means of self-fulfillment.

**The Enneagram of childhood behavior patterns**



**Considering the arrows**

So far, in our considerations, we have no idea what the arrows mean in the case of childhood personality development, apart from the fact that those two alternate energy configurations are likely to be assumed under certain circumstances. Let's take child 1 as an example, and see if we can figure out the nature of those circumstances.

The outward arrow from 1 to 4 shows the parental energy as (0) and the child expressing himself freely. We can make sense of this arrow by considering the child's situation, feeling always constrained by parental expectations. Evidently, the normally obedient child sometimes seeks to escape from the constraints of obedience, to express who

he really is. Faced with this unusual outburst of independence, the parent evidently abandons her normally controlling stance, and ignores the behavior.

This is in fact an effective conditioning strategy for extinguishing unwanted behavior, and an habitual controlling parent would be fluent in this tactic. Thus a type 1 child is systematically discouraged from such outbursts of self-expression – the parent tends to withdraw from the relationship when they occur.

The arrow from 7 to 1 shows the parental energy as (–) and the child being entertaining. We can make sense of this arrow by considering the parent’s situation. The controlling parent achieves the desired obedience from the child, but that creates an emotional distance between them. Evidently, such a parent sometimes seeks to escape from this emotional distance by letting down her guard and giving the child a bit of responsive attention.

The child would be thrilled by this attention, and like the 7 child would want to prolong the interaction with the parent by being entertaining. In this case the parent is *reinforcing* the behavior.

By similar considerations, we can make sense of both arrows for each of the relationship types, as shown in the following table. Red entries indicate who is initiating the shift in the relationship, and that’s most often the parent.

Relationship type	Outward arrow: child uncomfortable		Inward arrow: child comfortable	
	Parent	Child	Parent	Child
1	ignores outburst	seeking self-expression	seeking closeness	responds by entertaining
2	expressing authority	rebels, resentful that relationship has been violated	continues inattentively	seeking self-expression
3	seeking closeness	uses opportunity to tune relationship	expressing authority	responds with appeasement
4	parent is in child's space	responds with attempt at closeness, which is ignored	expressing authority	takes shelter in good behavior
5	parent is in child's space	responds by entertaining	expressing authority	rebels, resentful that relationship has been
6	expressing authority	responds with appeasement	disengaged	uses time to seek achievement, to regain parental attention
7	expressing authority	takes shelter in good behavior	continues responsively	seeking escape from being entertaining
8	seeking closeness	unusual intimacy uncomfortable – seeks to escape	disengaged	seeks to impress parent with approved behavior
9	disengaged	uses time to pursue fulfillment through achievements	seeking closeness	uses opportunity to tune relationship

## The Enneagram typology and the science of psychology

The dynamic Enneagram has enabled us to construct a plausible model of personality development, based on the assumption that personality is formed during the childhood years, in the context of the parent-child relationship. The model suggests that personality is partially innate, constrained to one of three types by each child’s *approach*, and it suggests that the parent’s approach to the child determines which of the three types will manifest.

The model predicts childhood behavior patterns that are clearly in alignment with the adult personality types identified in the familiar Enneagram typology. This suggests a scientific basis for that typology. Furthermore, the model suggests nuanced interpretations of the types and their alternate states, many of which interpretations have not been previously identified by the Enneagram community.

The model is testable empirically without reference to the dynamic Enneagram. The Enneagram served as an *analytic catalyst*; once developed, the model stands on its own. The research needed to verify or disprove the model is clearly indicated by the model itself.

We would need to find a way to determine the *approaches* of newborns, and verify that it remains usually constant throughout childhood. We'd need to examine the parent's approach to a particular child over time, and verify that it remains usually constant. We'd need to observe parent-child interactions in situ, noting the usual patterns, and keeping track of excursions into alternate patterns, and the circumstances involved. And so on.

If the model were to be verified empirically, that would put the Enneagram typology on a firm scientific basis, and the model itself would be likely take a prominent place in the domain of personality development theory.