Why so Gray Meredith Grey?

The show, *Grey’s Anatomy*, produced by ABC Studios, follows the lives of a group of doctors completing their residency at Seattle Grace Hospital. One of those doctors is Doctor Meredith Grey. Meredith Grey is the daughter of a famous heart surgeon named Ellis Grey. While Meredith was young, her mother had an affair with the now-chief of SGH, Richard Weber. The affair resulted in Ellis’s failed marriage to Meredith’s dad, which lead to his moving out and severing contact with Meredith and her mother.

Although Meredith is a talented, confident doctor, she is continually comparing herself to her mother and her mother’s accomplishments. While her mother may have been a talented surgeon, she was very clearly not a talented mother. She continually voiced her disappointment in Meredith and very rarely showed her affection.

Unsurprisingly, Meredith has developed trust issues and she doesn’t open up to others easily. In addition, she demonstrates extreme difficulty in forming attachments with men and is prone to one-night-stands as a way of dealing with her life when things don’t appear to be going her way. When meaningless one-night-stands backfire or don’t fill the void she feels, Meredith quickly shuts down and refuses to communicate what she is feeling.

Meredith Grey’s behaviors, thoughts, emotions, background, and daily functioning all contribute to what is collectively thought of as her personality. According to the behaviorist theory, founded by John Watson, personality is “the sum of everything that a person does and nothing else,” Funder, 478). The main goal of behaviorism is to conduct a functional analysis which maps out exactly how a person’s behavior is a function of his or her environmental situation (Funder, 479).
Behavioral theorists believe in the idea of empiricism, or the idea that we are all born with a “clean slate” which is written on by experience. “Only as a person encounters reality does he or she begin to accumulate experiences and thereby build a characteristic way of reacting to the world, that is, a personality” (Funder, 479). John Watson claimed that he could train anyone from infancy to become any profession, regardless of “talents, penchants, tendencies, vocations, and race of ancestors” (Funder 480). Even though Meredith’s father did not practice any type of medicine, Meredith, who was raised by her surgeon mother, became a surgeon. Watson would claim that this was because she spent most of her early years in a hospital, spending a majority of time observing the work of surgeons, so inevitably she became what she knew best.

Another aspect of behaviorism that was explored by John Watson and then further through theorists such as, of B.F. Skinner, focused on the effects of rewards and punishments and their impact on personality and behavior development. Associationism, another key aspect of the behaviorist approach, claims that “any two things, including ideas become mentally associated into one if they are repeatedly experienced close together in time” (Funder, 480). This concept is the reason why individuals actively and passively are able to learn or be conditioned to behave, think, and react in a specific way to certain kinds of stimuli. Operant Conditioning, which was the focus of B.F. Skinner’s work, is the idea that an organism actively learn to function in its world, in a way that will change its advantage (Funder, 486).

Through reinforcement and punishment, behavior either becomes more likely or less likely. As a child, Meredith observed her mother’s repeated failed relationships. Her mother’s relationship with her father failed and left Meredith feeling abandoned by her father as a result. This negative feeling produced by her father’s action of leaving her and her mom, served as a punishment or “aversive consequence” not only for her mother, but for Meredith as well (Funder, 490). Due to a lack of specificity, Meredith felt that she was the one being abandoned, that her trust had been misplaced.
Additionally, Meredith watches her mother get rejected by Richard Weber, who refuses to leave his wife for her, ultimately abandoning her mother. Watching her mother get abandoned by her lover, combined with the abandonment she herself had endured from her father, left Meredith with the association that men were not to be trusted, and allowing yourself to be vulnerable through love and trust in them would only result in punishment such as abandonment and ultimately heartache. By avoiding entering intimate relationships in which she herself formed an emotional attachment, Meredith’s aversive behavior yielded a negative reinforcement which encouraged her behavior: by not getting emotionally attached, she avoided the hurt that resulted from failed relationships and abandonment. Thus, Meredith’s avoidant tendency to get involved and form deep committed relationships with others resulted directly from her operant conditioning through her own experiences and her observation of her mother’s experiences.

It would appear that being able to associate a stimulus with a response is a particularly important skill to possess. While associating a stimulus with a response seems useful, the S-R conception of personality, encompasses the idea that everyone’s learning history is different therefore coming up with a particular structure or model for people’s patterns for reacting to any particular stimulus would produce incoherent results. Some, such as Meredith, have learned to be dominant in the workplace but meek at home around her mother. Encountering her mother at work, however, seems to trigger a subservient response even at work, because her feelings of inferiority are much more established with her mother than her feelings of dominance at work. This is particularly true in one episode in which Meredith’s mother is admitted into the hospital for her Alzheimer’s Disease and Meredith cowers in a corner when her mother yells at her for being there (because Ellis thinks she is still a surgeon and Meredith is still a child).

The conditioned response to become completely subservient in the presence of her mother, ultimately results from a long history of her mother’s consistent disappointment in Meredith no matter
what she does. In an episode during season three, entitled “Wishin’ and Hopin’”, Ellis temporarily becomes lucid and is able to understand her current situation which she normally is unable to do due to her advanced Alzheimer’s. When Meredith avoids talking to her mother, she explains herself to her friends claiming that “her mother has a long history of being disappointed” with her and she doesn’t want to go in the room because she is worried her mother will be disappointed. Izzie claims, “Parental disappointment ends with a medical degree,” in the hopes of reassuring Meredith that it will be alright. When Meredith finally does go to speak to her mom, her mother reacts with anger and claims that she is disappointed that she has to wake up after five years to discover Meredith is “no more than ordinary”. The stimulus in this case, (Meredith’s accomplishment of becoming a surgeon and being happy with her place in life) still produces an unpredictable and painful shock without much advanced warning. Meredith’s comments about her mother’s persistent disappointment in her indicate this is something she has had to deal with throughout her life, a painful and unwarranted response of disappointment which has ultimately lead to Meredith’s pattern of learned helplessness. If nothing Meredith does seems to produce some type of control over the relationship she and her mother have with one another, what hope does she have for changing the outcome and why bother trying if she can’t do anything about it? The relationship with her mother, abandonment from her father and from Derek at some stages produce learned helplessness, which greatly helps to provide an explanation for a good portion of Meredith’s ongoing battles with depression.

Another explanation of Meredith’s depression, stems from the cognitive approach, and more specifically the “declarative self”. The declarative self includes all conscious knowledge a person possesses about him or herself, this includes self-esteem as well as self-schema. A person’s self-esteem is the way they feel about themselves, while a self-schema includes “all of one’s ideas about the self, organized into a coherent system” (Funder, 566). A person’s self-schema shapes how they see the world
by which traits or skills they are “experts” at executing as a highly developed, almost automatic response to relevant situations (Funder, 567). While schemas are developed with knowledge based on past experiences, they are not necessarily reliant on memory and therefore can shape ones experiences in a bias manor. For example, Meredith may understand herself to be untrustworthy of others and resistant to opening up about her personal life, such as her relationship with her mother, however she may not understand why. Meredith was too young to fully understand that her mother was having an affair with Richard, finding out this information after the fact and altering the memory does not change Meredith’s persisting trust issues.

The Self-Discrepancy Theory explains who self-schemas can influence our emotions in terms of our concepts of our self schemas of our actual self, ideal self, and ought self (Funder, 571). When our actual self does not match our ideal self, or the view of what we could be at our best, the result is depression. Likewise, the extent to which our actual self falls short of our concept of our ought self, or what we should be, the result is anxiety (Funder, 571). This idea helps to explain Meredith’s depression in terms of her idea of her self. By continually comparing herself to her mother as a surgeon, Meredith views her actual self as being less than her ideal self, a great surgeon like her mother. In addition, Meredith’s self-schema includes knowledge of her fear of attachment and commitment creating a void between what she wants to be and what she is, as well as what she should be and what she is. She wants to be rewarded by forming a healthy and successful relationship with Derek, but she has a hard time letting go of her self-schema which is an automatic resistance to letting others in and allowing herself to be vulnerable which is causing her to punish herself while she is avoiding the punishment she fears most: rejection. As a result of these imbalances between what she wants, what she feels she should be, and what she actually is, Meredith is continually depressed and anxious.
In order to develop a less destructive self-schema, Meredith will need to go beyond the boundaries that her automatic schemas confine her to, and venture into unknown territory of letting Derek in and forming a deep, intimate bond that she is normally afraid of. As cognitive theorists explain, this is not easily done and would require great effort and bravery on Meredith’s part. In the recent season, Derek has been helping Meredith to overcome some of these highly developed patterns, giving the future a hopeful outlook for Meredith Grey!