Module 58

Trait Theories

Module Learning Objectives

58.1 Explain how psychologists use traits to describe personality.

58.2 Describe personality inventories, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses as trait-assessment tools.

58.3 Identify the traits that seem to provide the most useful information about personality variation.

58.4 Discuss whether research supports the consistency of personality traits over time and across situations.

58.1 How do psychologists use traits to describe personality?

Rather than focusing on unconscious forces and thwarted growth opportunities, some researchers attempt to define personality in terms of stable and enduring behavior patterns, such as Sam Gamgee's loyalty and optimism. This perspective can be traced in part to a remarkable meeting in 1919, when Gordon Allport, a curious 22-year-old psychology student, interviewed Sigmund Freud in Vienna. Allport soon discovered just how preoccupied the founder of psychoanalysis was with finding hidden motives, even in Allport's own behavior during the interview. That experience ultimately led Allport to do what Freud did not do—describe personality in terms of fundamental traits—people's characteristic behaviors and conscious motives (such as the curiosity that actually motivated Allport to see Freud). Meeting Freud, said Allport, "taught me that [psychoanalysis], for all its merits, may plague too deep, and that psychologists would do well to give full recognition to manifest motives before probing the unconscious." Allport came to define personality in terms of identifiable behavior patterns. He was concerned less with explaining individual traits than with describing them.

Like Allport, Isabel Briggs Myers (1987) and her mother, Katharine Briggs, wanted to describe important personality differences. They attempted to sort people according to Carl Jung's personality types, based on their responses to 126 questions. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), available in 21 languages, has been taken by more than 2 million people a year, mostly for counseling, leadership training, and work-team development (CPP, 2000). It offers choices, such as "Do you usually value sentiment more than logic, or value logic more than sentiment?" Then it counts the test-taker's preferences, labels them as indicating, say, a "feeling type" or "thinking type," and feeds them back to the person in complementary terms. Feeling types, for example, are told they are sensitive to values and are "sympathetic, appreciative, and tactful"; thinking types are told they "prefer an objective standard of truth" and are "good at analyzing." (Every type has its strengths, so everyone is affirmed.)

Most people agree with their announced type profile, which mirrors their declared preferences. They may also accept their label as a basis for being matched with work partners and tasks that supposedly suit their temperaments. A National Research Council report noted, however, that despite the test's popularity in business and career counseling, its initial use coterminous research on its value as a predictor of job performance, and "the popularity of this instrument in the absence of proven scientific worth is troublesome." (Druckman & Bank, 1991, p. 101; see also Fitts, 1993). Although research on the MBTI has been accumulating since those cautionary words were expressed, the test remains mostly a counseling and coaching tool, not a research instrument.

58.2 Exploring Traits

Classifying people as one or another distinct personality type fails to capture their full individuality. We are each a unique complex of multiple traits. So how else could we describe our personalities? We might describe an apple by placing it along several trait dimensions—relatively large or small, red or green, sweet or sour. By placing people on several trait dimensions simultaneously, psychologists can describe countless individual personality variations. (Remember from Module 58 that variations on just three color dimensions—hue, saturation, and brightness—create many thousands of colors.)

What trait dimensions describe personality? If you had an upcoming blind date, what personality traits might give you an accurate sense of the person? Allport and his associate H. S. Coe (1936) counted all the words in an unabridged dictionary with which one could describe people. There were almost 18,000! How then, could psychologists condense the list to a manageable number of basic traits?

58.3 Factor Analysis

One technique is factor analysis, a statistical procedure used to identify clusters of test items that tap basic components of intelligence (such as spatial ability or verbal skill). Imagine that people who describe themselves as outgoing also tend to say that they like excitement and practical jokes and dislike quiet reading. Such a statistically correlated cluster of behaviors reflects a basic factor, or trait—in this case, extraversion.

British psychologists Hans Eysenck and Sybil Eysenck (EY-zink) believed that we can reduce many of our normal individual variations to two or three dimensions, including extraversion-introversion and emotional stability-instability (Figure 58.1). People in 35 countries around the world, from China to Uganda to Russia, have taken the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire. When their answers were analyzed, the extraversion and emotional factors inevitably emerged as basic personality dimensions (Eysenck, 1990, 1992). The Eysencks believed that these factors are genetically influenced, and research supports this belief.

Figure 58.1 Two personality dimensions

Map makers can tell us a lot by using two axes (north-south and east-west). Two primary personality factors (extraversion-introversion and stability-instability) are similarly useful as axes for describing personality variation. Varying combinations of the two are described as introverts, extraverts, or more specific traits. From Eysenck & Eysenck, 1980.) (Those who are natively introverted, such as primatologist Jane Goodall, may be particularly gifted in field studies. Successful entertainers, including recording artist Katy Perry, are often natural extraverts.)
Bioology and Personality

Brain–activity scans of extraverts add to the growing list of traits and mental states that have been explored with brain-imaging procedures. (This line includes intelligence, impulsivity, addictive cravings, lying, sexual attraction, aggressiveness, empathy, spiritual experience, and even racial and political attitudes [Olsson, 2005].) Such studies indicate that extraverts seek stimulation because their normal brain arousal is relatively low. For example, PET scans show that a frontal lobes involved in behavior inhibition is less active in extraverts than in introverts (Johnson et al., 1999). Dopamine and dopamine-related neural activity tend to be higher in extraverts (Wacker et al., 2006).

Our biology influences our personality in other ways as well. As you may recall from the twin and adoption studies in Module 14, our genes have much to say about the behavioral style that helps define our personality. Jerome Kagan, for example, has attributed differences in children’s shyness and inhibition to their autonomic nervous system reactivity. Given a reactive autonomic nervous system, we respond to stress with greater anxiety and inhibition. The fearless, curious child may become the risk-taking, fast-moving, adult.

Other researchers report that personality differences among dogs (in energy, affect, activity, and curiosity intelligence) are as evident, and as consistently judged, as personality differences among humans (Gosling et al., 2003; Jones & Gosling, 2005). Monkeys, chimpanzees, orangutans, and even birds also have stable personalities (Wheel et al., 2006). Among the Great Tit (a European relative of the American chickadee), bold birds more quickly inspect new objects and explore trees (Grootveld & Careve, 2005; Verbeek et al., 1994). By selective breeding, researchers can produce bold or shy birds. Both have their place in natural history. In lean years, bold birds are more likely to find food; in abundant years, shy birds feed with less risk.

Assessing Traits

What are personality inventories, and what are their strengths and weaknesses as trait-assessment tools?

If stable and enduring traits guide our actions, can we devise valid and reliable tests of them? Several trait assessment techniques exist—some more valid than others (see Thinking Critically About: How to Be a “Successful” Astrologer or Palm Reader). Some provide quick assessments of a single trait, such as extraversion, anxiety, or self-esteem. Personality inventories—larger questionnaires covering a wide range of feelings and behaviors—assess several traits at once. The classic personality inventory is the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). Although it assesses “abnormal” personality tendencies rather than normal personality traits, the MMPI illustrates a good way of developing a personality inventory. One of its creators, Stark Hathaway (1960), compared his effort with that of Alfred Binet. Binet, as you will see in Module 6, developed the first intelligence test by selecting items that identified children who probably have trouble progressing normally in French schools. Like Binet’s items, the MMPI items were empirically derived. From a large pool of items, Hathaway and his colleagues selected those on which particular diagnostic groups differed. They then grouped the questions into 10 clinical scales, including scales that assess depressive tendencies, masculinity–femininity, and introversion–extraversion.

Hathaway and others initially gave hundreds of true-false statements (“No one seems to understand me,” “I get all the sympathy I should,” “I like poetry”) to groups of psychologically disordered patients and to “normal” people. They then compared them—no matter how silly it sounded—which on the patient’s answer differed from that of the normal group. “Nothing in the newspaper interests me except the comics” may seem senseless, but it just so happened that depressed patients were more likely to answer True.

Thinking Critically About

How to Be a “Successful” Astrologer or Palm Reader

Can we discern people’s traits from the alignment of the stars and planets at the time of their birth? From their handwriting? From lines on their palms? Astronomers scoff at the notion that astrology—the constellation have shifted in the millennia since astronomers formulated their predictions (Kelly, 1997, 1999). Humanists mock it: “No offense, bro, but if you take the horoscope seriously, your frontal lobes are the size of raisins.” Psychologists instead ask questions: Does it work? Can astrology surpass chance given someone’s birth data and ask to identify the person from a short lineup of different personality descriptions? Can people pick out their own horoscopes from a lineup of horoscopes? Does people’s astrological sign correlate with predicted traits?

The consistent answers have been No, No, and No (British Psychological Society, 1993; Carson, 1986; Kelly, 1997; Reichard, 2010). For example, one researcher examined census data from 20 million people in England and Wales and found that “astrological sign has no impact on the probability of marrying—and staying married—to someone of any other sign” (Moss, 2008).

Graphologists, who make predictions from handwriting samples, have no better than chance accuracy when trying to discern people’s occupations from examining pages of their handwriting [Bayerstein & Bayerstein, 1992; Dean et al., 1992]. Nevertheless, graphologists—and introductory psychology students—will often perceive correlations between personality and handwriting even where there are none (King & Koehler, 2000).

All these perceived correlations evaporate under close scrutiny. How do astrologers, palm readers, and crystal-ball gazers persuade millions of people worldwide to buy their services? Roy Hummel (1981), palm reader and research psychologist, has revealed some of their cunning methods.

The first trick, the “stock sale,” builds on the observation that each of us is in some ways like no one else and in other ways just like everyone. That some things are true of us all enables the “seer” to offer statements that seem impressively accurate: “I sense that you worry about things more than you let on, even to your best friends.” A number of such generally true statements can be combined into a personality description. Imagine that you take a personality test and then receive the following character sketch:

“A petite fortune-teller who escapes from prison is a small medium at large.” —Anonymous

You have a strong need for other people to like and to admire you. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself. ... You pride yourself on being an independent thinker and do not accept other opinions without satisfactory proof. You have found it uneasy to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extravagant, affable, sociable; at other times you are introverted, wary, and reserved. Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic (Davies, 1997; Foren, 1949).

In experiments, college students have received stock assessments like this one, drawn from statements in a newsstand astrology book. When they thought the bogus, generic feedback was prepared just for them and when it was favorable, they nearly always rated the description as either “good” or “excellent” (Davies, 1987). Even skeptics, given a flattering description attributed to an astrologer, begin to think that they owe it to themselves to check out this astrology stuff after all” (Glick et al., 1989).

An astrologer has to learn how to prepare a personalized reading that ‘pre pared to tell you what you think of yourself’ (Jones, 2000). This acceptance of stock, positive descriptions is called the Barmum effect, named in honor of master showman P. T. Bar mum’s dictum: ‘We’ve got something for everyone.’

A second technique used by seers is to ‘read’ our clothing, physical features, gestures, and reactions. An expensive wedding ring and black dress might, for example, suggest a wealthy woman who was recently widowed.

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Thinking Critically About (continued)

You, too, could read such clues, says Hyman. If people seek you out for a reading, start with some safe sympathy: "I sense you're having some problems lately. You seem unsure what to do. I get the feeling another person is involved." Then tell them what they want to hear. Memorize some Barron's statements from astrology and fortune-telling manuals and use them liberally. Tell people it is their responsibility to cooperate by relating your message to their specific experiences. Later they will recall that you predicted those specific details. Phrase statements as questions, and when you receive a positive response assert the statement strongly. Finally, be a good listener, and listen, in different words, reveal to people what you earlier revealed to you. If you do so, they will come.

Better yet, beware of those who, by exploiting people with these techniques, are fortune-takers rather than fortune-tellers.

(Nevertheless, people have had fun spoofing the MMPI with their own mock items: "Weeping brings tears to my eyes," "Faint screams make me nervous," and "I stay in the bathtub until I look like a raisin." [Frankel et al., 1983]. Today's MMPI-2 also has scales assessing, for instance, work attitudes, family problems, and anger.

In contrast to the subjectivity of most projective tests, personality inventories are scored objectively—so objectively that a computer can administer and score them. The computer can also provide descriptions of people who previously responded similarly. Objectivity does not, however, guarantee validity. For example, individuals taking the MMPI to employment purposes can give socially desirable answers to create a good impression. But in so doing they may also score high on a lie scale that assesses faking (as when people respond false to a universally true statement such as "I get angry sometimes"). The objectivity of the MMPI has contributed to its popularity and to its translation into more than 100 languages.

The Big Five Factors

58-3 Which traits seem to provide the most useful information about personality variation?

Today's trait researchers believe that simple trait factors, such as the Big Five—extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness—are important, but they do not tell the whole story. A slightly expanded set of factors—dubbed the Big Five—does a better job (Costa & McCrae, 2009). Work by Paul Costa, Robert McCrae, and others shows that we fall on these five dimensions—conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion; see TABLE 58.1, reveals much of what there is to say about our personality. Around the world—across 56 nations and 29 languages in one study (Schmitt et al., 2007)—people describe others in terms roughly consistent with this list. The Big Five may not be the last word. (Some researchers report it takes only two or three factors—such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion—to describe the basic personality dimensions [Block, 2010; De Raad et al., 2010].) But for now, at least, five is the winning number in the personality lottery (Heine & Buchtel, 2009; McCrae, 2009). The Big Five—today's "common currency for personality psychology" (Funder, 2001)—has been the most active personality research topic since the early 1990s and is currently our best approximation of the basic trait dimensions.
Our traits infuse our language. In text messaging, extraversion predicts use of personal pronouns, agreeableness predicts positive-emotion words, and neuroticism (emotional instability) predicts negative-emotion words (Holzinger, 2011).

By exploring such questions, Big Five research has sustained trait psychology and remains appreciated for the importance of personality: Traits matter.

**Evaluating Trait Theories**

58-4 Does research support the consistency of personality traits over time and across situations?

Are our personality traits stable and enduring? Or do our behavior depend on where and with whom we find ourselves? J.R.R. Tolkien created characters, like the joyal Sam Gamgee, whose personality traits were consistent across various times and places. The Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello had a different view. For him, personality was ever-changing, tailored to the particular role or situation. In one of Pirandello’s plays, Lamberto Ludovisi describes himself: “I am what you chose me to be: through my own madness, that does not prevent me from also being really what your husband, my sister, my niece, and Signora can take me to be—because they also are absolutely right.” To which Signora Sirelli responds, “In other words you are a different person for each of us.”

**The Person-Situation Controversy**

Who, then, typifies human personality, Tolkien’s consistent Sam Gamgee or Pirandello’s inconsistent Ludovisi? Both. Our behavior is influenced by the interaction of our inner disposition with our environment. Still, the question lingers: Which is more important? Are we more like Tolkien or as Pirandello imagined us to be?

When we explore this person-situation controversy, we look for genuine personality traits that persist over time and across situations. Are some people deliberately conscientious and others unredeemable, some cheerful and others sour, some friendly and outgoing and others shy? If we are to consider friendliness a trait, friendly people must act friendly at different times and places. Do they?

In earlier chapters, we considered research that has followed lives through time. We noted that some scholars (especially those who study infants) are impressed with personality change; others are struck by personality stability during adulthood. As Figure 58.2 illustrates, data from 152 long-term studies reveal that personality trait scores are positively correlated with scores obtained seven years later, and that as people grow older their personality stabilizes. Interests may change—the avid collector of tropical fish may become an avid gardener. Careers may change—the determined salesman may become a determined social worker. Relationships may change—the hostile spouse may start over with a new partner. But most people recognize their traits as their own, note Robert McCrae and Paul Costa (1994), “and it is well that they do. A person’s recognition of the inevitability of his or her one and only personality is . . . the culminating wisdom of a lifetime.”

So, most people—including most psychologists—would probably side with Tolkien’s assumption of stability of personality traits. Moreover, our traits are socially significant. They influence our health, our thinking, and our job performance (Deary & Matthews, 1993; Hogan, 1998). Studies that follow lives through time show that personality traits rival socioeconomic status and cognitive ability as predictors of mortality, divorce, and occupational attainment (Roberts et al., 2007).

Although our personality traits may be both stable and potent, the consistency of our specific behaviors from one situation to the next is another matter. As Walter Mischel (1968, 2004) has pointed out, people do not act with predictable consistency. Mischel’s studies of college students’ conscientiousness revealed but a modest relationship between a student’s being conscientious on one occasion (say, showing up for class on time and being similarly conscientious on another occasion and saying, turning in assignments on time). Pirandello would not have been surprised. If you’ve noticed how outgoing you are in some situations and how reserved you are in others, perhaps you’re not surprised either (though for certain traits, Mischel reports, you may accurately assess yourself as more consistent).

This inconsistency in behaviors also makes personality test scores weak predictors of behavior. People’s scores on an extraversion test, for example, do not nearly predict how sociable they actually will be on any given occasion. If we remember such results, says Mischel, we will be more cautious about labelling and pigeonholing individuals. Stars in advance, science can tell us the phase of the Moon for any given date. A day in advance, meteorologists can often predict the weather. But we are much further from being able to predict how you will feel and act tomorrow.

However, people’s average outgoingness, happiness, or carelessness over many situations is predictable (Epinson, 1963a, b). When rating someone’s shyness or agreeableness, this consistency enables people who know someone well to agree on their ratings (Kemrick & Funder, 1988). By collecting snippets of people’s daily experience via body-worn recording devices, Matthias Mehl and his colleagues (2006) confirmed that extraverts really do talk more. I. have repeatedly vowed to cut back on my jabbering and joking during my nighttime pickup basketball games with friends, alas, moments later, the irresistible chatterbox inevitably recoups my body. Are our best friends can verify, we do have genetically influenced personality traits. And those traits even lurk in our

- music preferences. Classical, jazz, blues, and folk music lovers tend to be open to experience and verbally intelligent; country, pop, and religious music lovers tend to be cheerful, outgoing, and conscientious (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003, 2006). On first meeting, students often disclose their music preferences to another; in doing so, they are swapping information about their personalities.

- bedrooms and offices. Our personal spaces display our identity and leave a behavioral residue (in our scattered laundry or neat desktop). And that helps explain why just a few minutes’ inspection of our living and working spaces can enable someone to assess with reasonable accuracy our conscientiousness, our openness to new experiences, and even our emotional stability (Gosling et al., 2002, 2008).
Module 58 Review

58-1 How do psychologists use traits to describe personality?
- Trait theorists see personality as a stable and enduring pattern of behavior. They describe our differences rather than trying to explain them.
- Using factor analysis, they identify clusters of behavior tendencies that occur together. Genetic predispositions influence many traits.

58-2 What are personality inventories, and what are their strengths and weaknesses as trait-assessment tools?
- Personality inventories (such as the MMPI) are questionnaires on which people respond to items designed to gauge a wide range of feelings and behaviors.
- Test items are empirically derived, and the tests are objectively scored. But people can fake their answers to create a good impression, and the ease of computerized testing may lead to misuse of the tests.

Multiple-Choice Questions
1. Which of the following is the best term or phrase for a characteristic pattern of behavior or a disposition to feel and act?
   a. Myers-Briggs Indicator
   b. Factor analysis
   c. Introversion
d. Extraversion
e. Trait

2. Which of the following is a "Big Five" personality factor?
   a. Serenity
   b. Neuroticism
c. Dutifulness
d. Dominance
e. Abstractness

3. Which of the following is best described along a continuum ranging from ruthless and suspicious to helpful and trusting?
   a. Conscientiousness
   b. Agreeableness
c. Openness
d. Extraversion
e. Perfectionism

4. Which of the following is true based on "Big Five" personality traits research?
   a. Highly conscientious people are likely to be evening people or "owls."
   b. Highly conscientious people get poor grades.
c. Married partners scoring the same on agreeableness are more likely to experience marital dissatisfaction.
d. Shy introverts are more likely to prefer communicating through e-mail instead of in person.
e. Neuropsychologists predict the use of positive-emotion words in text messages.
Practice FRQs

1. Explain one weakness and one strength of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI).

Answer

1 point: One point for any strength (for example, the MMPI is empirically derived, assesses several traits at once, or is easily scored).

1 point: One point for any weakness (for example, the MMPI test-taker might not answer honestly, or validity is not guaranteed).

2. Explain Hans and Sybil Eysenck's personality dimensions.

(4 points)

Module 59

Social-Cognitive Theories and Exploring the Self

Module Learning Objectives

59.1 Identify the psychologist who first proposed the social-cognitive perspective, and describe how social-cognitive theorists view personality development.

59.2 Describe how social-cognitive researchers explore behavior, and state the criticism they have faced.

59.3 Explain why psychology has generated so much research on the self, and discuss the importance of self-esteem to psychology and to human well-being.

59.4 Discuss some evidence for self-serving bias, and contrast defensive and secure self-esteem.

59.5 Discuss how individualist and collectivist cultures influence people.

Social-Cognitive Theories

59.1 Who first proposed the social-cognitive perspective, and how do social-cognitive theorists view personality development?

Today's psychological science views individuals as biopsychosocial organisms. The social-cognitive perspective on personality proposed by Albert Bandura (1986, 2008) emphasizes the interaction of our traits with our situations. Much as nature and nurture always work together, so do individuals and their situations.

Those who take the behavioral approach to personality development emphasize the effects of learning. We are conditioned to repeat certain behaviors, and we learn by observing and imitating others. For example, a child with a very controlling parent may learn to follow orders rather than think independently, and may exhibit a more timid personality.

Social-cognitive theorists do consider the behavioral perspective, including others' influence. (That's the "social" part.) However, they also emphasize the importance of mental processes. What we think about our situations affects our behavior. (That's the "cognitive" part.) Instead of focusing solely on how our environment controls us, as behaviorists do, social-cognitive theorists focus on how we and our environment interact: How do we interpret and respond to external events? How do our schemas, our memories, and our expectations influence our behavior patterns?