



Encyclopedia of Counseling

Personality Theories, Traits

Contributors: William Fleeson
Edited by: Frederick T. L. Leong
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Traits may make up the most readily recognizable component of personality. Very simple at base, traits describe what individuals are like, often with single words such as *adventurous* or *kind*. Although traits are used commonly, both in daily life and in research, surprisingly little is known about how traits work or how they influence behavior. Instead, psychology was dominated by 70 years of skepticism that traits influence behavior, or for that matter that traits even exist. Finally, after many years of empirical investigation, psychologists now know that traits do in fact relate to consistent behavior, although this consistency is not easily discernible in behavior on any given occasion. Furthermore, personality psychologists have discovered how traits may be organized, that traits predict a host of important life outcomes, and that traits increase in stability from adolescence through adulthood.

Traits are an important concept in counseling psychology for at least three reasons. First, the personality of clients infuses the counseling process, and traits make up a major component of personality. Second, traits are highly relevant to life success, to adjustment, and to affective and personality disorders. Third, traits constitute a useful gateway to understanding clients and to clients understanding themselves.

What Are Traits?

There has not yet been sufficient research to determine the nature of traits or their underlying mechanisms, that is, how they work. Personality psychologists take their starting point in common sense and in the everyday ways people describe each other. From there, they diverge, and there are still multiple competing definitions of traits and theories about how they work.

Agreement about What Traits Are

Despite these disagreements, there are at least five issues on which most trait theories agree. First, traits describe individuals and emphasize the style or manner in which individuals act, think, and feel. For example, bolder individuals act, think, and feel in a bolder manner. Second, traits are characteristics on which people differ from each other. For example, some individuals are bolder than others. Third, individuals most likely do not differ in whether or not they have the trait but rather in the degree to which they have the trait. For example, although it may be convenient to speak of bold people and timid people, it is more likely that individuals differ all along a continuous dimension of boldness.

Fourth, traits endure for at least some extended time. For example, describing someone as a bold individual is more accurate if that individual is bold for more than just a moment. Finally, traits are broad descriptions of some kind of regularity, generality, or coherence in behavior, thought, and feeling. This generality may refer to the way the individuals act across different situations, to the way they act in significant, defining situations, or to a wide range of ways they act. For example, bolder individuals engage in a variety of bold actions, such as stating opinions, taking risks, and making decisions.

In sum, trait theories generally agree that traits describe differences between people in their styles of acting, thinking, and feeling, on continuous dimensions that show at least some enduring stability and broad generality. To call someone bold is to say that he or

she behaves, thinks, and feels in bolder ways than others do, and that he or she has done so for some period of time in a variety of situations with a variety of actions.

Three Foci of Theories about the Nature of Traits

Theories addressing the nature of traits typically focus on one of three aspects of traits. The first type of theory focuses on underlying causal forces that constitute the traits, in order to explain trait-relevant behavior. For example, Gordon W. Allport proposed one of the early and prominent theories of the causal forces underlying traits. He claimed that traits are neurocognitive structures that lead individuals to interpret a range of situations as being equivalent to each other and relevant to the trait. Although subsequent theories have proposed other causal forces, there has not been enough research yet to explain how traits cause behavior. Unresolved issues include how many causes underlie traits and the relative strengths of those causes. Also unknown is whether a given trait has the same effect in every situation, or has different effects in different situations depending on the unique features of that situation.

A second type of theory does not necessarily deny explanatory causal forces, but rather focuses attention on the behavior patterns that result from traits. For example, the density-distributions approach characterizes a person's trait by his or her entire distribution of trait-relevant behaviors, rather than by only his or her most frequent or typical way of acting. This theory finds that most individuals regularly and routinely manifest nearly all levels of most traits in their daily behavior. For example, most individuals have a normal distribution of how bold their behaviors are that ranges from very timid to very bold.

Instead of trying to explain or describe behavior, the final type of theory focuses on how the different traits relate to each other in people. One prominent such theory, the Big Five theory, concerns which traits co-occur in the same individuals to what extent. For example, boldness and adventurousness co-occur in the same individuals but they do not co-occur frequently with calmness and security.

Which Traits Should Be Used to Describe Individuals?

The search for traits is a search for descriptions of individuals that point out styles of acting, thinking, and feeling. These styles should be present in multiple behaviors of a given individual but present to different degrees in different individuals. It turns out that there is an overabundance of such candidates. The English language contains over 18,000 potential words for traits (e.g., the letter *a* alone provides *acerbic*, *angelic*, *active*, *adventurous*, *argumentative*, *agreeable*, *anal*, *arduous*, *ardent*, *able*, *addled*, *aloof*, *affable*, *amiable*, and many more). Adding multiword phrases, such as *can dish it out but can't take it* reveals a potentially infinite number of traits. This overabundance makes a comprehensive description of an individual seem almost impossible. Furthermore, the existence of differently named traits that might actually mean something similar (e.g., *kind*, *charitable*, *gracious*, and *humane*) creates wasted efforts. Thus, there arose a need to organize traits into a manageable structure.

Raymond B. Cattell and others applied a creative solution in the early part of the 20th century. They used the statistical technique of factor analysis to identify redundant traits, that is, those traits that usually co-occur in people. For example, if each individual has the same level of boldness as he or she has of adventurousness, then these two traits

are redundant. This technique revealed the astonishing finding that eliminating redundancies reduced the number of traits from 18,000 down to only 5. For example, the traits of being bold, assertive, adventurous, talkative, dominant, and many others can be subsumed under the trait of Extraversion. The five subsuming traits, called the Big Five, are Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability (which is also known as its opposite, Neuroticism), and Intellect. Subsequent research has shown that most other theoretically derived traits fit into the Big Five as well.

There are other significant theoretical claims about which traits are the most important. Hans J. Eysenck proposed that Psychoticism, Extraversion, and Neuroticism are the three most important traits. Jack Block proposed that Ego-Control and Ego-Resiliency are two traits that are central to human functioning and adaptation. The interpersonal circumplex model proposed that the two traits of Dominance and Agreeableness are the most important interpersonal traits.

Are Traits Real?

For almost 70 years, psychologists debated whether traits make much difference in people's behavior. Some argued that traits are such weak determinants of behavior relative to the immediate situation that a given individual will act very differently from occasion to occasion. Others countered that traits are such powerful determinants of behavior that each individual will act in a consistently similar way from occasion to occasion. When similarity of behavior across multiple occasions was finally assessed, it turned out that each person's behavior indeed varied a great deal from moment to moment, as much as mood varied across occasions and more than people differed from each other. For example, the typical person changed rapidly back and forth from introverted to extraverted within the course of just 2 weeks. This evidence suggested that situations are very powerful in determining momentary behavior. People's everyday intuition that traits do exist and are powerful may be based on the fact that they see the people they know in a limited range of situations. People then overgeneralize from the few instances of behavior they witness.

However, it turns out that each person has a mean or average way of acting around which he or she varies. Furthermore, measuring each person's average in successive weeks revealed these averages to be almost perfectly consistent from week to week. For example, a person's average level of Extraversion is usually the same week after week.

Thus the two positions can be integrated: Each person has his or her own different and very stable average around which he or she varies quite a bit from occasion to occasion. The stable averages reveal individuals' traits and the variability around the averages reveals their responses to situations. Interestingly, people also differ in how much they vary around their average, and this too is stable from week to week.

These findings demonstrate that individuals have enormous flexibility in how they act, think, and feel in the moment, yet still have consistent behavioral tendencies (i.e., traits). Isolated actions do not define a person, and some people are more variable than others.

Do Traits Matter?

While the debate raged about whether traits exist, correlational studies were quietly

accumulating evidence that traits have large and diverse relationships to many of the important outcomes in life, including happiness, objective events, and even death.

Regardless of how happiness, or psychological well-being, is defined, it is strongly predicted by the Big Five traits. Happiness—defined as positive affect (e.g., excitement and enthusiasm)—is predicted more strongly by Extraversion than by any other variable, including health, money, and relationships. Happiness—defined as the absence of negative affect (e.g., little anxiety or stress)—is predicted more strongly by Emotional Stability than by any other variable. Happiness—defined as life satisfaction, the cognitive judgment of one's overall life quality—is predicted by all five traits.

Traits also predict objective outcomes. Job performance, across all levels of job complexity, is predicted by Conscientiousness. Marriage quality, conflict, abuse, and ultimately marriage dissolution, are all predicted strongly by Emotional Stability and Agreeableness. Mental health disorders have been related to all Big Five traits. Even length of life is predicted by Conscientiousness, as effectively as it is predicted by high blood pressure and high cholesterol. People higher in Conscientiousness may live as much as 5 years longer than those lower in Conscientiousness. This potentially very important finding has generated much recent research in trying to verify it and identify the causal mechanisms underlying personality's relationship to length of life.

Can Traits Change?

Given that traits have such important life consequences, it is imperative to determine whether traits can be changed. Research has established that there is at least some genetic influence on individuals' trait levels. However, it is important not to confuse genetic influence with inability to be changed.

Researchers have accumulated extensive evidence about how traits change naturally. Longitudinal studies measure participants' traits at one age and then years or decades later measure the same participants' traits again. These studies have converged on two general findings. First, there is evidence of slight overall mean level changes from adolescence to older adulthood. Slight decreases occur in Emotional Stability (or Neuroticism), Extraversion, and Intellect and slight increases occur in Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, Ego-Control, Delay of Gratification, and Ego-Resiliency. Second, there is substantial change in people's relative positions on personality traits during adolescence and emerging adulthood. Relative-position changes are changes when some individuals increase on the trait and others decrease, changing their positions relative to each other. For example, many adolescents become less neurotic as they grow into their 20s but some become more neurotic. As individuals grow older, however, there is increasingly less relative-position change.

These descriptive studies reveal only the natural developmental changes that occur in traits. There have been few systematic efforts to change traits, so it is unclear what would happen if a systematic effort were undertaken to, for example, change an individual's level of Emotional Stability. However, the large amount of variability in the typical individuals' trait-relevant behavior suggests that change is possible. Most individuals already routinely and regularly act at most levels of most traits, suggesting that they have at least some capacity to express traits at different levels.

Future Directions

Several unresolved questions about traits have important implications for personality and for the quality of life. First, the nature of traits must be determined. This issue refers to the causal forces underlying traits, the patterns of behavior that are implicated by trait standing, and how traits relate to other personality components such as motives and beliefs. Second, the understanding of the organization of traits needs to be advanced. The cross-cultural generalizability of organizational schemes, their appropriateness for all individuals, and the inclusion of as yet undiscovered traits all require additional research. Third, the causal mechanisms underlying the influence of traits on life outcomes must be determined in order to provide more effective opportunities for intervention. Finally, the potential and means for change in personality traits should be identified, given the significance of traits in life.

- traits
- extraversion
- agreeableness
- trait theories
- neuroticism
- ego
- happiness

William Fleeson

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See also

- [Costa, Paul T., and McCrae Robert R. \(v2\)](#)
- [Cultural Values \(v3\)](#)
- [Goldberg, Lewis R. \(v2\)](#)
- [Personality Assessment \(v2\)](#)
- [Personality Disorders \(v2\)](#)
- [Personality Theories \(v2\)](#)
- [Personality Theories, Five-Factor Model \(v2\)](#)
- [Personality Theories, Social Cognitive \(v2\)](#)
- [Person-Environment Interactions \(v2\)](#)
- [Psychological Well-Being, Dimensions of \(v2\)](#)
- [Trait-Factor Counseling \(v4\)](#)

Further Readings

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