Contemporary Research on Personality

Module 35
Contemporary Research on Personality

The Trait Perspective

- Exploring Traits
- Assessing Traits
- The Big Five Factors
- Evaluating the Trait Perspective
Contemporary Research on Personality

The Social-Cognitive Perspective

- Reciprocal Influences
- Personal Control
- Assessing Behavior in Situations
- Evaluating the Social-Cognitive Perspective
Contemporary Research on Personality

Exploring the Self

- The Benefits of Self-Esteem
- Culture and Self-Esteem
- Self-Serving Bias
The Trait Perspective

An individual’s unique constellation of durable dispositions and consistent ways of behaving (traits) constitutes his or her personality.

Examples of Traits

Honest
Dependable
Moody
Impulsive
Exploring Traits

Each personality is uniquely made up of multiple traits.

Allport & Odbert (1936), identified almost 18,000 words representing traits.

One way to condense the immense list of personality traits is through factor analysis, a statistical approach used to describe and relate personality traits.
Factor Analysis

Hans and Sybil Eysenck suggested that personality could be reduced down to two polar dimensions, **extraversion-introversion** and **emotional stability-instability**.
Biology and Personality

Personality dimensions are influenced by genes.

1. Brain-imaging procedures show that extraverts seek stimulation because their normal brain arousal is relatively low.

2. Genes also influence our temperament and behavioral style. Differences in children’s shyness and inhibition may be attributed to autonomic nervous system reactivity.
Assessing Traits

**Personality inventories** are questionnaires (often with true-false or agree-disagree items) designed to gauge a wide range of feelings and behaviors assessing several traits at once.
MMPI

The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) is the most widely researched and clinically used of all personality tests. It was originally developed to identify emotional disorders.

The MMPI was developed by empirically testing a pool of items and then selecting those that discriminated between diagnostic groups.
MMPI Test Profile

- Hypochondriasis (concern with body symptoms)
- Depression (pessimism, hopelessness)
- Hysteria (uses symptoms to solve problems)
- Psychopathic deviancy (disregard for social standards)
- Masculinity/femininity (interests like those of other sex)
- Paranoia (delusions, suspiciousness)
- Psychasthenia (anxious, guilt feelings)
- Schizophrenia (withdrawn, bizarre thoughts)
- Hypomania (overactive, excited, impulsive)
- Social introversion (shy, inhibited)

After treatment (no scores in the clinically significant range)
Before treatment (anxious, depressed, and displaying deviant behaviors)
The Big Five Factors

Today’s trait researchers believe that earlier trait dimensions, such as Eysenck’s personality dimensions, fail to tell the whole story. So, an expanded range (five factors) of traits does a better job of assessment.

Conscientiousness
Agreeableness
Neuroticism
Openness
Extraversion
# Endpoints

## The “Big Five” Personality Factors

*(Memory tip: Picturing a CANOE will help you recall these.)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait Dimension</th>
<th>Endpoints of the Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conscientiousness</strong></td>
<td>Organized ←→ Careful ←→ Disciplined ←→ Careless ←→ Impulsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agreeableness</strong></td>
<td>Soft-hearted ←→ Trusting ←→ Helpful ←→ Ruthless ←→ Suspicious ←→ Uncooperative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neuroticism</strong></td>
<td>Calm ←→ Secure ←→ Self-satisfied ←→ Anxious ←→ Insecure ←→ Self-pitying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(emotional stability</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>vs. instability)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Openness</strong></td>
<td>Imaginative ←→ Preference for variety ←→ Independent ←→ Practical ←→ Preference for routine ←→ Conforming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extraversion</strong></td>
<td>Sociable ←→ Fun-loving ←→ Affectionate ←→ Retiring ←→ Sober ←→ Reserved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Adapted from McCrae & Costa (1986, p. 1002).*
Questions about the Big Five

1. How stable are these traits?  
   Quite stable in adulthood. However, they change over development.

2. How heritable are they?  
   Fifty percent or so for each trait.

3. How about other cultures?  
   These traits are common across cultures.
Evaluating the Trait Perspective

The Person-Situation Controversy

Walter Mischel (1968, 1984, 2004) points out that traits may be enduring, but the resulting behavior in various situations is different. Therefore, traits are not good predictors of behavior.
The Person-Situation Controversy

Trait theorists argue that behaviors from a situation may be different, but average behavior remains the same. Therefore, traits matter.

![Graph showing trait score correlations over seven years for Children, Collegians, 30-year-olds, and 50- to 70-year-olds.]
The Person-Situation Controversy

Traits are socially significant and influence our health, thinking, and performance (Gosling et al., 2000).
Consistency of Expressive Style

Expressive styles in speaking and gestures demonstrate trait consistency.

Observers are able to judge people’s behavior and feelings in as little as 30 seconds and in one particular case as little as 2 seconds.
Social-Cognitive Perspective

Bandura (1986, 2001, 2005) believes that personality is the result of an interaction that takes place between a person and their social context.

Albert Bandura
Individuals & Environments

Specific ways in which individuals and environments interact

Different people choose different environments.

The school you attend and the music you listen to are partly based on your dispositions.

Our personalities shape how we react to events.

Anxious people react to situations differently than relaxed people.

Our personalities shape situations.

How we view and treat people influences how they treat us.
Behavior emerges from an interplay of external and internal influences.

**Biological influences:**
- genetically determined temperament
- autonomic nervous system reactivity
- brain activity

**Psychological influences:**
- learned responses
- unconscious thought process
- optimistic or pessimistic attributional style

**Social-cultural influences:**
- childhood experiences
- influence of the situation
- cultural expectations
- social support
Personal Control

Social-cognitive psychologists emphasize our sense of personal control, whether we control the environment or the environment controls us. **External locus of control** refers to the perception that chance or outside forces beyond our personal control determine our fate.

**Internal locus of control** refers to the perception that we can control our own fate.
Learned Helplessness

When unable to avoid repeated adverse events, an animal or human learns helplessness.
Optimism vs. Pessimism

An optimistic or pessimistic attributional style is your way of explaining positive or negative events.

Positive psychology aims to discover and promote conditions that enable individuals and communities to thrive.
Positive Psychology and Humanistic Psychology

Positive psychology, such as humanistic psychology, attempts to foster human fulfillment. Positive psychology, in addition, seeks positive subjective well-being, positive character, and positive social groups.

Martin Seligman

Courtesy of Martin E.P. Seligman, PhD, Director, Positive Psychology Center, University of Pennsylvania
Assessing Behavior in Situations

Social-cognitive psychologists observe people in realistic and simulated situations because they find that it is the best way to predict the behavior of others in similar situations.
Evaluating the Social-Cognitive Perspective

The social-cognitive perspective on personality sensitizes researchers to the effects of situations on and by individuals. It builds on learning and cognition research.

Critics say that social-cognitive psychologists pay a lot of attention to the situation and pay less attention to the individual, his unconscious mind, his emotions, and his genetics.
Exploring the Self

Research on the self has a long history because the self organizes thinking, feelings, and actions and is a critical part of our personality.

1. Research focuses on the different selves we possess. Some we dream and others we dread.
2. Research studies how we overestimate our concern that others evaluate our appearance, performance, and blunders (*spotlight effect*).
Benefits of Self-Esteem

Maslow and Rogers argued that a successful life results from a healthy self-image (self-esteem). The following are two reasons why low self-esteem results in personal problems.

1. When self-esteem is deflated, we view ourselves and others critically.

2. Low self-esteem reflects reality, our failure in meeting challenges, or surmounting difficulties.
Culture & Self-Esteem

People maintain their self-esteem even with a low status by valuing things they achieve and comparing themselves to people with similar positions.
Self-Serving Bias

We accept responsibility for good deeds and successes more than for bad deeds and failures. Defensive self-esteem is fragile and egotistic whereas secure self-esteem is less fragile and less dependent on external evaluation.