

# Definition of soft skills psychology essay



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Skills, as we know are partly inherent and partly imbibed. Honing up of skill-sets from their current quality levels upwards involves the training process; that encompasses personal attributes, social behavior, inter-personal & group interaction, linguistic process, individual traits, friendly disposition and temperament, characterizing behaviorisms with other individuals & groups internal or external to the organization. In other words, the Emotional Quotient is handled to its optimized synchronization with their Individual Intelligence Quotient or occupational skills. Former characteristics are termed in a cluster as SOFT SKILLS. Precisely, soft skills are the abilities and traits of a person pertaining to personality and attitude, rather than to formal technical abilities which are termed as HARD SKILLS. Though hard skills can be distinguished from soft skills for the purpose of categorization, but as far as learning is concerned, there is no need to do the same.

Soft skills complement the use of hard skills in workplace, enabling individuals to navigate successfully the challenges of job to achieve personal and organizational goals. Although soft skills are different from hard skills, and available literature gives concurrence to this fact, but these are not two separate entities. Indeed they are two sides of the same coin. As Jackson (2009) states that soft skills exist in a symbiotic relationship with hard skills, these are complementary to each other.

A thorough literature review led reviewer to come across interesting definitions of soft skills stated by different authors. These definitions, as reviewer opines, are not mere providing synonyms for soft skills but defining these skills in their totality giving their in depth meaning.

## **2. 1. a Definition of Soft Skills as Defined by Various Authors**

In order to understand the real meaning of soft skills and its implications various definitions from varied sources have been analyzed; which are presented as follows.

“ Soft skills are the range of general education skills that are not domain- or practice-specific, which include communication and interpersonal skills, problem solving skills, conceptual/analytical and critical skills, visual, aural and oral skills, judgement and synthesis skills.”(Boyce et al 2001)

“ Soft skills relate to goal-directed behaviors used in face-to-face interactions in order to bring about a desired state of affairs.” (Hayes 2002)

“ Soft skills are personal qualities, attributes, or the level of commitment of a person that sets him or her apart from other individuals who may have similar [technical] skills and experiences.” (Perrault 2004)

“ These are non-technical traits and behaviors needed for successful career navigation, [which] allow you to more effectively use your technical abilities and knowledge.” (Klaus et al 2007)

“ Cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark each of us to varying degrees, are soft skills.” (Anju 2009)

“ Soft skills allow a person to better understand his or her own actions, how to work better with others, and most importantly, how to be more productive and successful.” (Muzio and Fisher 2009)

“ Soft skills may be viewed as the communication and interpersonal skills required to elicit the activities [and processes] performed by different stakeholders...all of which need to be accomplished through dialogue with stakeholders.” (Jeyaraj 2010)

“ These are managerial, intra-personal, and interpersonal skills that are used to resolve workplace problems.” (Joseph et al 2010)

“ Soft knowledge is intangible knowledge, which is difficult to quantify, codify, store, and transmit, because it relates to more personal characteristics and includes judgement and experience...internalised skills acquired with experience and practice.” (Kajnc and Svetlicic 2010)

“ Employees who can forge partnerships, build relationships, communicate effectively with the business, and find creative ways to manage costs are the most valuable to the organization.” (Pratt et al 2010)

“ These are skills or behaviours that make employees effective in their roles and distinguish some candidates for leadership positions.” (Ranade et al 2010)

## **2. 2 TYPES OF SOFT SKILLS**

While reviewing available literature in the form of research papers, text books and online blogs, researcher comes across the finding that although every piece of writing acknowledges and talks highly about the importance of soft skills, but for every author definition of soft skills encompasses a different set of traits and skills. Indeed, this term has a meaning so vast that it is practically a tedious job to enumerate the traits representing soft skills.

Furthermore, opinions might vary in preference order if one thinks of enumeration. A relatively well-accepted taxonomy of traits called the “ Big Five,” can be considered worth discussing if one intends to enlist some of the major soft skill traits.

These personality traits are primarily measured by personality psychologists using self-reported surveys. This “ big five” taxonomy of traits enlists five most important traits which are broad enough to encompass many other narrowly defined soft skill qualities. These five traits are openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (John and Srivastava 1999). Heckman JJ (2012) also mentions many other taxonomies, such as the ‘ Big Three’, the ‘ MPQ’, and the ‘ Big Nine’.

Heckman also mentions that they are conceptually and empirically related to the Big Five.

## **Table: The Big Five domains and their facets**

### **Big Five Personality Factors**

#### **Facets ( Corelated Traits)**

Conscientiousness

Competence (efficient)

Order (organized)

Dutifulness (not careless)

Achievement striving (ambitious)

Self-discipline (not lazy)

Deliberation (not impulsive)

Openness to Experience

Fantasy (imaginative)

Aesthetic (artistic)

Feelings (excitable)

Actions (wide interests)

Ideas (curious)

Values (unconventional)

Extraversion

Warmth (friendly)

Gregariousness (sociable)

Assertiveness (self-confident)

Activity (energetic)

Excitement seeking (adventurous)

Positive emotions (enthusiastic)

Agreeableness

Trust (forgiving)

Straight-forwardness (not demanding) Altruism (warm)

Compliance (not stubborn)

Modesty (not show-off)

Tender-mindedness (sympathetic)

Neuroticism/ Emotional Stability

Anxiety (worrying)

Hostility (irritable)

Depression (not contented)

Self consciousness (shy)

Impulsiveness (moody)

Vulnerability to stress (not self-confident)

As many are the speakers on soft skills, as many are the classification schemes. According to Whetten et al (2000) soft skills are of three types; intrapersonal, interpersonal and people management skills.

Kantrowitz (2005) and Bacolod et al (2009) on the other hand classifies soft skills on the bases of job type. According to him there are certain jobs which are ' low soft skill occupations' such as assemblers, car washers, garbage collectors, data entry, etc. On the other extreme there are high soft skill occupations such as CEOs, funeral directors, receptionists, salespersons, secretaries, social workers, teachers, therapists, etc. Regarding this job-type

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oriented classification an interesting point is highlighted by Kantrowitz (2005); author feels that even in low soft skill occupations where interpersonal (people) skills are not required much, intrapersonal skills such as self regulation are essential. The best opinion having reviewer's concurrence is given by Crosbie (2005); as per the author in era of highly interconnected world where little work gets done alone, there is hardly any occupation where an employee doesn't need some of interpersonal skills.

## **2.3 INTELLIGENCE: GOVERNING FACTOR FOR SOFT SKILLS**

There have been radical changes in the meaning of 'intelligence' in last few decades. Considering 'intelligence' provides an important perspective on soft skills, indeed an obvious factor affecting or predicting the development of soft skills, reviewer considers concept of intelligence worth reviewing.

There are a number of studies that have examined the relationships between intelligence and performance and that are quite relevant to the soft skills debate.

It was when Harvard professor of education 'Howard Gardner' dismantled the prevailing monolithic view of academic intelligence around 25 years ago, there came the concept of 'multiple intelligences' (Gardner 1983; Gardner and Hatch 1987). There are now 'practical intelligence', 'emotional intelligence', 'social intelligence', 'ecological intelligence' and 'spiritual intelligence' (Albrecht 2006; Goleman 2006, Goleman 2009, Zohar and Marshall 2001)



## **Practical Intelligence (PI)**

As per Sternberg and Hedlund (2002) PI is the intelligence acquired experientially, and is needed to solve practical problems and to succeed in everyday working life. Practical intelligence makes a person 'street smart' instead of 'book smart'. Further strengthening the claim of importance of PI, Stenberg states that PI accounts for those aspects of performance where traditional measures of IQ apparently cannot account for. Reviewer feels that PI is the essence soft skill development.

## **Emotional Intelligence (EI)**

It is universally accepted that emotions affect our lives; literate or illiterate, all agree to this highly studied theory. The best and precise scientific statement, as reviewer finds in the work done by Lam and Kirby (2002), states that emotions tend to occur involuntarily based on the responses of the limbic system, but once they have happened, and have been recognised by the higher-level cognitive systems, it becomes possible not only to guard against potentially distracting emotions but also to build on enhancing emotions in ways that facilitate individual as well as team performance. So if emotions can be mastered successfully, life can be reached to its highest dimension, and this is called emotional intelligence. EI skills if acquired correct, can help individuals to consciously monitor and manage their own emotions as well as those of others.

It is worth noticing that it is seen by Chia (2005) that there is a positive relation in the job offers received by an individual made by accounting firms to accounting graduates. Considering high impact of EI on employability

author recommends promoting ' the relevance of soft skills for potential accounting professionals'

In a quite famous international bestseller ' Emotional Intelligence' Daniel Goleman (1995) claims that EI ' can be as powerful, and at times more powerful than IQ'. Further strengthening his claim Goleman (1998) states that 67% of abilities ' deemed essential for effective performance were emotional competencies'.

## **Intuitive Intelligence**

Intuitive intelligence is again a highly developed domain of mind. If intuition has to be defined, Dane and Pratt (2007) states that intuitions are affectively charged judgements that arise through rapid, non-conscious and holistic associations' As per Sadler-Smith and Shefy (2010) there are three attributes of intuitive intelligence, namely expertise, understanding and self awareness.

## **SOFT INTELLIGENCE**

These three intelligences i. e PI, EI and II collectively termed as ' softer intelligences' are cardinal in determining an individual's soft skills. These make a high impact on decision-making, strategy development, creativity, ethics and interpersonal functioning.

## **2. 4 IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS**

Although the whole research is oriented towards highlighting the importance of soft skills, reviewer finds some real life examples from literature which evidently clarify and prove that soft skills are so essential to possess that without them prospects of growth are almost stunted.

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While technical skills help in letting your foot in the door, soft skills keep these door sopen. Work ethics, attitude, communication skills, emotional intelligence and a whole host of other personal attributes are the soft skills that are crucial for career success. Hard skills are essential in work that is technical, scientific and professional, but insufficient for effective performance. Technical skills are supposed to be supplemented by non-technical, job-related skills for their effective implementation.

Heckman JJ and Kautz T (2012) present some hard evidences on soft skills. Their work not only further highlights the importance of soft skills, and provides graphical data, but also leads reviewer to some other important sources to better understand the concept. Their work discusses soft skills in terms of personality traits. It gives evidences to prove the importance of personality in economic and social life. After reviewing their work it becomes very clear that success in life depends on many traits. IQ, grades, and standardized achievements tests can not be the sole criteria of success or outcome. Indeed personality traits predict and cause outcomes. The message gets more impregnated in mind when Heckman and Kautz quote a real life example given by Alfred Binet the creator of the first IQ test (the Stanford-Binet test);

“ A child, even if intelligent, will learn little in class if he never listens, if he spends his time in playing tricks, in giggling, in playing truant.”

Talking in terms of success in school, Binet and Simon (1916) also agree that one needs many other things than intelligence to succeed in studies. Attention, will, sound character, tranquility and industriousness are the

essentials for success. Success in life relies not only on cognition. It is further proven when we come back to research carried out by Heckman JJ and Kautz T. It questions analysts and policy makers who rely solely on achievement tests to monitor school performance and school systems. It is seen that a certain class of subjects lacking in some important personality traits performs almost equally well as other class with enriched traits in achievement test, but at the same time performs much worse in many other aspects of life.

The more researcher explores literature on importance of soft skills, the more she feels that soft skills bring out the inner qualities of man. These traits are the essence of expression. The definition of personality traits given by Roberts (2009) is the outline of researcher's thought;

“ Personality traits are the relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that reflect the tendency to respond in certain ways under certain circumstances.”

Soft skills enable individuals to manage successfully the challenges and opportunities of their job role (Hayes 2002; Perrault 2004). Soft skills are highly needed in developing, expanding and maintaining relations over the boundaries. Communication skills are cardinal to develop trusting relationships. A study published in ' European Journal of Engineering Education' observed the weekly team meetings of engineering students attending two US universities and one Asian university as they collaborated as a single global virtual (GV) capstone GV team. Study indicated the importance of student choice of virtual communication tools, the refining of

communication practices, and specific actions to build trusting relationships. As student developed these attributes, collaboration and success was evident. (Zaugg and Davies 1). In a study on soft skills & employability in UK retail sector, Nickson and group discuss how UK government policy has emphasized the importance of qualifications in enhancing employability. The important finding which comes in light is that it is soft skills that are required to access entry level jobs for front-line work in retail (Nickson D, et al 2012 . 2). These skills not only enhance the performance of individuals but also of teams and of organizations (Whetten et al 2000, Martin et al 2008).

It is true that there is practically no field or profession where soft skills are not needed. As per Beard et al (2009) there is an increased demand for soft skills in the IT professions. Gokuladas (2010) mentions that engineering students' education in terms of the soft skills they acquire has a significant influence on their employability in campus recruitment drives. If talk about accounting profession then accountants are not mere 'bean counters' now. In accounting, soft skills and hard skills exist symbiotically, just like in any other profession. As per Wolosky (2008), there is need for accountants to engage in relationship-building and act as internal consultants.

The QS Top MBA Jobs and Salary Trends Report 2010 shows that demand for 'soft' skills has drastically increased in importance for MBA recruiters worldwide. The survey of over 5, 000 MBA recruiters in 36 countries, shows that MBA recruiters already have very high expectations of rigorous finance, marketing and e-business or IT skills from business school graduates. MBA recruiters are now looking for another set of abilities to complement their

businesses in today's competitive economic climate, and that is soft skills (Geraghty Ross 3)

Soft skills have that high importance in today's competitive world that individuals might get fired for the lack of soft skills. Quite aptly said " people get hired for their professional skills, but get fired for their lack of soft-skills", the well known case of US vice-consul in Chennai is the perfect example. Maureen Chao, in a speech recounting her experiences in India as a student, said that a harrowing train journey had left her skin " dirty and dark, like the Tamilians." The comment led to exchanges of letters at governmental level, and she had to leave India. (4)

## **2. 5 SOFT SKILLS DEFICIT**

The problem is, the importance of these soft skills is often undervalued, and there is far less training provided for them than hard skills. For some reason, organizations seem to expect people know how to behave on the job. They tend to assume that everyone knows and understands the importance of being on time, taking initiative, being friendly, and producing high quality work.

Assuming that soft skills are universal leads to much frustration. That's why it's so important to focus as much on soft skills training and development as you do on traditional hard skills.

The soft skills deficit is also judged to be one of the main barriers to employability for those currently locked out of the labor market. CIPD surveys show a deficiency in 'employability skills' for many students and school-leavers unable to deal effectively with customers, to manage their

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interactions and emotions and to engage as productive members of the workforce. More worryingly, some young people have not developed the skills that would help them to hold down jobs. Some are even unable to manage the task of turning up at work on time, which has, to some derision, been identified as a 'skill'. Yet for people who cannot do it, that's precisely what it is. Soft skills are also an essential component of leadership and management skills. Poor management is as much about poor behaviour and attitude as it is about poor delivery and implementation. Sadly, as our report shows, many management education programmes spend little time on this crucial and cost-efficient area for improvement.

The question goes beyond the scope and remit of this report but, for example, as far as business education in the US is concerned, in a 2007 article headlined 'The trouble with MBAs', Fortune magazine reported that US business schools have produced 'freshly minted' quantitative geniuses but consistently failed to deliver the softer skills that employers value most (Fisher 2007). Indeed, soft skill development is one of half a dozen features of an 'idealised' MBA curriculum and considered to be as important as 'sound data analysis and the rigorous application of analytical management tools' (Navarro 2008, p108).

As Mintzberg (2004) noted, when graduates of business education are asked for one improvement in the MBA, they 'always' respond with 'soft skills'; to him this is unsurprising since managing is mostly about the 'soft stuff - working with people, doing deals, processing vague information'. The problem, as Mintzberg sees it, is that soft skills simply don't fit in at business schools for several quite good reasons:

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1 Most professors can't teach them and/or don't care about them.

2 Most of the younger students aren't ready to learn them.

3 Soft skills aren't compatible with the rest of the programme (Mintzberg 2004, p41).

Williamson and group (5) explored key personality traits of engineers for innovation and technology development, in their study. It was found that engineers scored low on many qualities such as assertiveness, conscientiousness, customer service orientation, emotional stability, extraversion, image management, optimism, visionary style, and work drive.

Additionally, many MBA candidates, particularly in Asia, fail to appreciate the value of such learning, even seeing it as a waste of time. Especially when compared with more classroom hours with a noted finance professor, for example (6)

At a recent dinner in Washington, D. C., with representatives from major American manufacturing companies, I listened as the talk turned to how hard it is to find qualified applicants for jobs. Applicants were often so underqualified, they said, that simply finding someone who could properly answer the telephone was sometimes a challenge (7).

Engineering: Morris and Watson (2004) observed that engineers are often considered to have ' a very limited knowledge of soft skills' (p26) and argued that it is ' too easy for us [engineers] to just be technicians' (p29) and ignore or overlook the vital role that soft skills play in deploying technical know-how effectively (see also Thilmany 2004 for a discussion of the stereotypical view

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of engineers, for example ' If we wanted to be involved with people we would be therapists [not engineers]', p5). Recent research suggests that engineering students' education in terms of the soft skills they acquire has a significant influence on their employability in campus recruitment drives (Gokuladas 2010).

## **SURVEY REPORTS**

More than 600, 000 jobs in manufacturing went unfilled in 2011 due to a skills shortage, according to a survey conducted by the consultancy Deloitte.

In the Manpower Group's 2012 Talent Shortage Survey, nearly 20% of employers cited a lack of soft skills as a key reason they couldn't hire needed employees. " Interpersonal skills and enthusiasm/motivation" were among the most commonly identified soft skills that employers found lacking.

The SHRM/AARP survey also found that " professionalism" or " work ethic" is the top " applied" skill that younger workers lack.

The National Employer Skills Survey for England (NESS) 2009 is the most recent in a series of surveys established under the auspices of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) in 2003. The aim of NESS2009 was to provide information from employers on skills deficiencies and workforce development activities, which could serve as a basis for the development of policy and the assessment of impact of skills development initiatives. The main survey was large (around 79, 000 responses were received) and a follow-up survey also collected cost-of-training data from a sub-sample (N = 7, 317). The NESS findings are comprehensive, and from the perspective of <https://assignbuster.com/definition-of-soft-skills-psychology-essay/>

scoping the domain of soft skills, several issues of potential relevance emerged with respect to skills shortages and skills gaps.

1. Occupational groups in which skill shortages were highest were 'skilled trades' (31% of vacancies were skill shortage vacancies), 'professional' and 'associate professional' occupations (23% and 20% respectively).

2. Occupational groups in which skill shortages were lowest were 'administrative and secretarial' (10%), 'elementary occupations' (11%), and 'sales and customer service positions' (12%). 3. Main skills types that were lacking were:

(i) 'technical and practical skills' (62%);

(ii) 'customer handling skills' (41%);

(iii) 'problem-solving skills' (38%);

(iv) 'team working skills', (37%);

(v) 'oral communication skills' (35%);

(vi) 'written communication skills' (34%);

(vii) 'management skills' (32%).

**(TWO MORE GRAPHS TO BE INSERTED HERE)**

## **2. 6 SOFT SKILL PREDISPOSITION & TRAINING**

Soft skills and the softer intelligences are learned through personal experience, exposure, practice, feedback and reflection.

The foundation of practical intelligence is tacit knowledge ('street smarts') acquired through the experience of solving real-world problems in real time. But practical intelligence is also supported by technical knowledge ('book smarts') acquired in formal learning settings. In the world of work, being 'street smart' or 'book smart' is insufficient on its own; each needs the other (Sternberg and Hedlund 2002).

Soft skills don't develop overnight; they're built up over the longer term by transforming experiences through the process of learning (cf. Kolb 1984), which is a soft skill in itself. While experiential learning is something that can occur naturally, leaving it to chance can be inefficient (Revans 1983); it's more efficient to help individuals understand how they learn and enable them to learn how to learn (Mainmelis et al 2002). The ability to reflect in action is a soft skill; it helps us to deal intuitively with situations that are uncertain, unstable, unique and value-laden.

There are also individual differences operating here. Some people are more predisposed towards intuition than others, while others are more predisposed towards analysis. However, it is not a question of 'analysis or intuition'; 'analysis and intuition' are both invaluable components of our mental toolkit. And while we all have preferences for one mental gear or the other (that is, intuition or analysis), we can develop the soft skill of 'cognitive versatility' by becoming more intuitive or more analytical (see Figure 12 on page 28 and also Hogarth 2001; Sadler-Smith 2010 for a discussion of how to educate intuition).

There is the perception, and perhaps misapprehension, that soft skills are innate and cannot be learned or that they are not really worth learning compared with hard skills.

Although researcher feels that all soft skill traits are necessary in one or other domain of life, but she also admits the fact that preference of one trait over other might vary person to person and profession to profession.

Different tasks require different traits in different combinations.

Heckman JJ (2012) is quite apt in his saying when he mentions that achieving certain goals requires certain traits, e. g., a surgeon has to be careful and intelligent; a salesman has to be outgoing and engaging and so forth, etc. It highlights another very important aspect of soft skills that ' these can be trained'.

Author mentions that traits are developed through practice, investment, and habituation.

In this regard, McAdams and Pals (2006) adds goals to the list of possible traits. Almlund et al. (2011) develop a model in which preferences and traits determine the effort applied

to tasks.

A study published in ' International Journal of Organizational Behaviour & Management Perspectives' carried out to see the effect of leadership behavior development programme on the MBA students, highlights an important finding. According to the study, among the study group a group of students was lacking in leadership qualities. This group of students

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underwent soft skills training programme in later semesters. When they were assessed again with respect to leadership behavior, an improvement in leadership qualities was witnessed (8).

(At Hamilton Health Sciences (HHS) a two-day program was developed in collaboration with the RRT Team Leads, Organizational Effectiveness and Patient Safety Leaders. Participants reflected on their conflict management styles and considered how their personality traits may contribute to team function. Communication and relationship theories were reviewed and applied in simulated sessions in the relative safety of off-site team sessions. The overwhelming positive response to this training has been demonstrated in the incredible success of these teams from the perspective of the satisfaction surveys of the care units that call the team, and in the multi-phased team evaluation of their application to practice. These sessions offer a useful approach to the development of the soft skills required for successful RRT implementation 9)

## **2. 7 SOFT SKILLS ON SCIENTIFIC GROUNDS**

These skills can be seen as touchy/feely and ephemeral, when in fact the latest neuroscience shows that the emotional and rational sphere are highly interconnected (Lehrer 2009). Helping managers to give appropriate feedback, to listen and to reflect before reacting could be major drivers of employee engagement and motivation, for example.

### **Extreme Examples of Personality Change**

Laboratory experiments and brain lesion studies provide some of the most compelling evidence that personality traits can change and that the change

affects behaviors. The most famous example is that of Phineas Gage, a railway construction foreman whose head was impaled by a metal spike. Miraculously he retained his problem solving abilities, but he changed from being polite and dependable to being rude and unreliable. His personality change caused him to lose his job and alienate family members (Damasio et al., 2005).

Laboratory experiments show that expressed traits can be manipulated temporarily. Magnetic disruption of the left lateral prefrontal cortex can increase experimentally elicited discount rates (Figner et al., 2010) and nasal sprays of oxytocin increase trust (Kosfeld et al., 2005).

Evidence in neuroscience suggests that expression of traits is related to regions of the brain (see Canli, 2006; DeYoung et al., 2010)

### **The evolution of personality traits over the life cycle**

The term “ traits” suggests a sense of permanence and possibly also of heritability. The terms “ skills” and “ character” suggest that they can be learned. Most studies in psychology only report correlations between measured traits and outcomes without addressing whether the traits cause the outcomes and without controlling for the other traits and incentives that determine performance on the tasks used to measure the traits.

While traits are relatively stable across situations, they are not set in stone. They change over the life cycle. On average, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness tend to grow with age. Different facets of cognitive ability peak at different ages. Interventions, education, and parenting can affect traits in lasting ways.

Even though personality traits are relatively stable across situations, they are not set in stone. They change over the life cycle. Fig. 3 shows that Conscientiousness tends to increase monotonically over the life cycle. Other traits change in different ways over the life cycle. 41

Psychologists distinguish between  $\eta^2$ , fluid intelligence (the rate at which people learn) and crystallized intelligence (acquired knowledge). 19

Crystallized intelligence tends to increase monotonically for most of the life cycle, whereas  $\eta^2$ , fluid inte