

Psychology essays - perspective on personality



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This essay will begin by giving a description of what personality is, before going on to critically evaluate trait and type approaches of personality.

The precise definition of personality has been a controversial issue over many years by various theorists. One definition of personality can be described as the underlying causes of individual behaviour and experience within a person (Cloninger, 2000).

Trait and type theory is one of many personality approaches and has been an influential part of personality theory and research. The basic assumption of the trait and type approach is that people possess broad predispositions to respond in particular ways (Pervin, 1993). Therefore, traits are the fundamental building blocks of personality because they produce consistent patterns in our behaviour. Allport and Odbert (1936, cited in Cloninger, 2000), found that the English dictionary lists 18, 000 words referring to personality traits. It is difficult to know which of these traits are actually basic and applicable to everyone and which ones are variations of other traits. In order to eliminate unnecessary traits, some researchers have statistically examined which trait scores tend to be correlated. This is done by the use of questionnaires and from this, factor analysis is carried out. Factor analysis is carried out by using a large number of test items administered to many participants, which are then co varied. This enables the identification of groups, clusters or factors of related items.

Cattell (1957) proposed 16 dominant personality dimensions. Each of these was defined by a pair of adjectives, such as outgoing versus reserved, tense versus relaxed and suspicious versus trusting. However, later research by

other investigators, managed to reduce this number even smaller. Norman (1963, cited in Goldberg, 1990) found five major dimensions of personality, often called the 'Big Five'. This five-factor model is a descriptive classification of traits into broad domains called extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness to experience. His analysis relied largely upon factor analysis. Within these dimensions are lower-level traits such as, talkative versus silent and sociable versus reclusive, which come under the extroversion dimension. This model proposes that human personality can be fully described in terms of five dimensions, however in order to fully understand what an individual's personality is, the lower-level traits are needed.

Researchers such as Costa & McCrae (1992) claim that the five-factor model is the best theory of personality. An alternative five-factor model was also proposed by Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Thornguist & Kiers (1991, cited in Zuckerman, Kuhlman, Joireman, Teta & Kraft, 1993), and adds impulsive sensation seeking, aggression-hostility and activity to sociability and neuroticism-anxiety to the model.

Nevertheless, a number of investigators have suggested that there may be even fewer underlining dimensions (e. g. Livneh and Livneh, cited in Gleitman, Fridlund & Reisberg, 1999). However, the most influential researcher is Eysenck (1967) who found two basic dimensions of personality. He named these introversion-extroversion and neuroticism (stable-unstable). The extrovert is sociable, impulsive and enjoys new experiences, while the introvert tends to be more solitary, cautious and slow to change (Eysenck, 1967). Neuroticism relates to emotional stability, and Eysenck (1967) states <https://assignbuster.com/psychology-essays-perspective-on-personality/>

that neuroticism/emotional stability and extroversion/introversion are independent dimensions. Introverts and many neurotics have something in common, they are both unsociable and withdrawn, but their lack of sociability has different roots. Introverts are not afraid of social activities, they just don't like them, however, neurotically shy people keep to themselves through fear of joining in.

In the 1970's, Eysenck added psychoticism onto his existing two-dimension classification. People high on this dimension tend to be insensitive, uncaring about others and opposed to accepted social custom (Pervin, 1993). Eysenck (1991, 1992, cited in Eysenck, 1993) has argued that the factors agreeableness and conscientiousness in the Big-Five model are facets of the higher-level construct of psychoticism. Goldberg and Rosolack (in press, cited in Eysenck, 1993) have shown that psychoticism as measured by the P-scale in the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) is a blend of agreeableness and conscientiousness. Although Eysenck (1967) does not include openness to experience in his approach, he argues that it is important because it is related to cognitive and educational traits, including intelligence.

The Big five-factor model was challenged by Waller and Ben-Porath (1987, cited in McCrae and Costa, 1989), who claimed that additional research is needed in order to relate the five-factor model to alternative personality systems. McCrae and Costa (1989) carried out research in order to overcome this issue and the most interesting research involved the comparison of the NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI), with the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Dachowski (1987, cited in McCrae and Costa, 1989) predicted that

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there would be strong correlations between MBTI extroversion-introversion and the extraversion factor, and between MBTI sensing-intuition and the openness factor. However, she claimed that there would only be moderate correlations of MBTI thinking-feeling and judging-perception, with the agreeableness and conscientiousness factors. Using self-report data in samples of 267 men and 201 women aged 19 to 93, McCrae and Costa (1989), found that the hypotheses had been confirmed and there were high correlations ranging in absolute magnitude from 0.44 to 0.74 (all $p < 0.001$).

Although instruments such as the NEO-PI seem to obtain reliable and valid assessments of each of the five factors, a major concern is whether the model can be applied practically in organisational, educational and clinical settings (McCrae and Costa, 1989).

Miller (personal communications, July 2, 1987; July 31, 1987, cited in McCrae and Costa, 1989) argued that knowledge of the client's standing on the five factors could be useful to the clinician in choosing appropriate therapy. For example, cognitive therapy might appeal more to introverts, whereas, client-centred therapy may be preferable to extraverts.

Recently, it has been found that personality measures, when classified within the Big-Five domains, are related to a variety of criteria of job performance (Eysenck, 1993). Barrick and Mount (1991, cited in Eysenck, 1993) found that measures associated with conscientiousness (factor 3) are likely to be valid predictors for all jobs. Tett, Jackson and Rothstein (1991, cited in Eysenck, 1993), concluded that personality measures related to

agreeableness (factor 2), were most highly related to criteria of job performance. Although these large-scale quantitative reviews do acknowledge the impact of personality traits on job performance, there is still inconsistency between them, which highlights the need for more precise research on personality-performance relations (Eysenck, 1993).

Although there appears to be practical implications for the Big Five model, it is not without criticism. McAdams (1992) claims that although this model may be an important one in the study of personality, it is far from being an integrative model of personality. He also states that because the five factors are so broad, trait scores may not be highly useful in the prediction of specific behaviour in particular situations (McAdams, 1992). However, Digman (1990), states that the five-factor model's main aim was to be empirical and compatible with other major psychological theories, and this has been achieved. McCrae and Costa (1989) also state that the five-factor model should not be seen as a replacement for other personality models, but as a framework for interpreting them.

The Big five-factor theory and the three-factor theory seem to agree on two basic points. First, Cattell's, (1967, cited in Zuckerman et al, 1993) 16-factor personality theory has too many dimensions. Research has also shown that these factors do not seem to be replicable across gender, age, or methods and many investigators have simply failed to find them. The second point is that in the five- and three-factor models, they both agree that two of the major factors are extraversion-introversion and neuroticism. However, there is less agreement on the lower level traits, as proposed by Norman (1963, cited in Gleitman, 1999).

In an empirical analysis carried out by Zuckerman et al (1993), they found that there was a great deal of convergence among the major factors in the three-trait models, particularly the two five-factor models. Extroversion and neuroticism are fairly similar in all three models, despite differences in their components.

Much research has been carried out in order to support Eysenck's approach. In a study by Barrett, Petrides, Eysenck & Eysenck (1998), the factorial similarity of extroversion, neuroticism, psychoticism and social desirability were assessed using gender-specific data collected from 34 countries across the world. They used the Kaiser-Hunka Bianchini (KHB) procedure, however, this procedure was modified due to previous criticism of the validity of this procedure. Eysenck has suggested that it is necessary to collect data for cross-cultural comparisons between countries and cultures using the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ), as the main measuring instrument. The main aim was to compare the factorial structure of the EPQ within each country, to that of a UK dataset. This comparison would establish whether there is universality of the psychometric scales of extroversion, neuroticism, psychoticism and social desirability.

Eysenck and Eysenck (1985, cited in Barrett et al., 1998), claimed that extroversion, neuroticism, psychoticism and social desirability would prove to be universal across countries and cultures because these scales are based upon a biological theory of personality. For example, introverts are more easily aroused by events and more restrained and inhibited than extroverts. In fact, several studies of identical and fraternal twins suggest that heredity plays a major part in their scores on this dimension (Shields, 1976, cited in <https://assignbuster.com/psychology-essays-perspective-on-personality/>

Pervin, 1993). It was also found that people high on neuroticism tend to be emotionally susceptible and frequently complain of worry and anxiety, as well as bodily aches, such as headaches. It was suggested that individual differences was due to an inherited biological difference in nervous system functioning. Although social desirability has not been specified in this way, Eysenck (1985, cited in Barrett et al., 1998) still claims that there will also be universality. The results found that the factors of extroversion, neuroticism, psychoticism and social desirability were strongly replicable across all of the 34 countries.

The trait and type theory approach does seem to be effective in describing and providing evidence for personality. Generally in the study of personality, trait psychologists seek to discover the psychological dimensions along which people differ and the ways in which traits cluster within individuals – the major focus being on enduring behaviour (Buss, 1989). The impact of experimental manipulations is not always investigated, because the focus is on the content of behaviour not the psychological process underlying the behaviour. This has been debated by many researchers e. g. Mischel (1968, cited in Hjelle, 1992).

An experiment by Fenigstein (1979, cited in Buss, 1989), investigated whether manipulations are crucial determinants of behaviour. He placed each participant (with different degrees of public self-consciousness) in a waiting room with two other participants, who were experimental accomplices. In the control condition these accomplices responded to conversation by the participant, but did not respond in the experimental condition. This manipulation found that participants high in the public self-

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consciousness trait, reported high levels of discomfort and tended to avoid choosing the accomplices as subsequent partners in the second part of the experiment, compared to those participants low on this trait. This empirical research seems to suggest that traits do have an impact on behaviour, and experimental manipulations significantly influence behaviour (Buss, 1989).

Another criticism of the trait theory approach is with the use of factor analysis. The results obtained from this, relies heavily on the exact contents of the data set. Therefore, if the items included in the analysis are changed, the resulting factors may be significantly different. Consequently critics argue that it is difficult to claim that any single factor analysis allows us to identify the real dimensions of personality.

In conclusion, it seems that the study of personality is not as clear cut as one would hope. Although there appears to be many similarities among the trait theorists, there are also differences between them. It is also important to point out that there are many other approaches and perspectives of personality – behaviourist, social cognition and dynamic perspectives, which may provide a more complete understanding of personality. No one model seems to be appropriate in accounting for the whole theory of personality, but it seems apparent that each theorist does provide a valuable theory of personality.

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