Trait, Trait Theory

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Trait theory is one of the major approaches to the study of human personality. In the framework of this approach, personality traits are defined as habitual patterns of behavior, thought, and emotion that are manifest in a wide range of situations. The most important features of traits are relative stability over time, different degrees of expression in different individuals, and influence on behavior.

Gordon Allport was a pioneer in the study of personality traits, which he referred to as dispositions. Allport distinguished three such dispositions: *cardinal dispositions* – obvious, main traits that are dominant in an individual's life (e.g., narcissism); *central dispositions* – not as salient as cardinal traits, but significant and found to some degree in every person; and *secondary dispositions* – less visible, less stable individual traits, seen in specific situations. Most people, according to Allport, do not have a cardinal disposition (these are so dominant that they dominate the person's life and cannot be hidden), but instead are described by their central dispositions. Allport believed that the identity of each person could be described by 5-10 individual traits (the central dispositions), and that the members of a culture or nation share *common dispositions*. Although Allport understood the value of nomothetic science, he also advocated for an idiographic approach to understanding personality, aimed at recognizing the unique traits of each person.

Further development in trait theory has been associated with the application of factor analysis. This method allows identification of trends in large amounts of data and produces factors that are continuous, bipolar, and capable of describing individual differences. Factor models differ in the number of factors and degree of connection among them. For example, Raymond Cattell developed the Sixteen Personality Factor Model that includes the following traits: 1) Warmth (A); 2) Reasoning (B); 3) Emotional Stability (C); 4) Dominance (E); 5) Liveliness (F); 6) Rule-Consciousness (G); 7) Social Boldness (H); 8) Sensitivity (I); 9) Vigilance (L); 10) Abstractedness (M); 11) Privateness (N); 12) Apprehension (O); 13) Openness to Change (Q1); 14) Self-Reliance (Q2); 15) Perfectionism (Q3); and 16) Tension (Q4). Cattell used factor analysis with oblique rotation, meaning the factors in his model may be related to each other (i.e., not independent of one another). To measure these traits he developed the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16 PF). Cattell believed that each person can be characterized by a unique combination of expression of these traits. He factor analyzed these primary traits and discovered five second-order or Global Factors: 1) Openness / Tough-mindedness; 2) Self-Control; 3) Extraversion; 4) Independence / Accommodation; and 5) Anxiety.

Based on the results of multiple abstract variance analysis (MAVA), Cattell concluded that about two-thirds of the characteristics of personality are determined by the influence of the environment, and one-third depends on heredity. He suggested that personality traits can describe not only individuals, but also social groups. He used the term *syntality* to denote the range of traits that may characterize a group. Cattell studied syntality of various religious, educational, and professional groups, as well as entire nations. The main features that define sintality of a country include the size of its territory, morale, wellbeing, and degree of industrialization.

Another important theorist, the British psychologist Hans Eysenck, developed a hierarchical model of personality that includes three factors: 1) Extraversion / Introversion, 2) Neuroticism / Stability, 3) Psychoticism /

Socialization. Eysenck used factor analysis with orthogonal rotation, meaning the traits in his model are uncorrelated. He and his colleagues developed the Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPI) and Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) for measuring these traits. The Eysenck Personality Profiler (EPP) breaks down different facets of each trait. Eysenck suggested that personality traits are products of the brain, and the result of genetic factors.

A contemporary trait theory, The Five-Factor Theory postulated by Robert R. McCrae and Paul T. Costa, Jr., is based on the Five Factor Model (FFM), also known as the *Big Five*. The Big Five factors are Openness to Experience (O), Conscientiousness (C), Extraversion (E), Agreeableness (A), and Neuroticism (N); often referred to via the common acronyms OCEAN, NEOAC, or CANOE. The NEO Personality Inventory–Revised (NEO PI–R) provides scores for the five broad domains as well as for six subordinate dimensions (or facets) within each of the Big Five. Results of numerous cross-cultural studies based on the FFM show that the same structure exists in samples from different countries.

The Big Five factors correspond fairly closely to Cattell's five Global Factors in the following way:

Big Five Factor	Global Factor
Openness	Openness/Tough-mindedness
Conscientiousness	Self-control
Extraversion	Extraversion
Agreeableness	Independence/Accommodation
Neuroticism	Anxiety

All trait models include extraversion versus introversion as one of the central dimensions of human personality, and most factor models include neuroticism, or emotional instability. Constructs that describe Extraversion / Introversion and Neuroticism / Emotional stability are found in ancient philosophy and the many psychological theories of temperament, character, and personality. These facts provide some evidence of the universality of these traits (or factors) in different cultures.

Current research indicates that personality traits are significant predictors of social behavior, determining five to 50% of the variance (typically about 30%), subject to the following factors: 1) reliability of measurement parameters of the investigated social behavior using multi-factor, integrated assessments, as well as different methods and sources of data; 2) validity of the methods used to measure the traits; 3) presence of a logical and theoretically grounded connection of personality traits with particular social behaviors, which can then be tested empirically.

SEE ALSO: Big Five (The Five-Factor Model and The Five-Factor Theory) Eysenck, Hans; Factor Analysis; Personality; Personality Assessment; Temperament

Further Reading

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