**The Trait Theory of Personality**

If someone asked you to describe a close friend's [personality](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-personality-2795416), what kind of things would you say? A few things that might come to mind are descriptive terms, such as "outgoing," "kind" and "even-tempered." All of these represent traits. What exactly does this the word "trait" mean?

**A trait can be thought of as a relatively stable characteristic that causes individuals to behave in certain ways. The trait approach to personality is one of the major theoretical areas in the study of personality. The trait theory suggests that individual personalities are composed of these broad dispositions.1﻿**

Unlike many other theories of personality, such as [psychoanalytic](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-psychoanalysis-2795246) or [humanistic theories](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-humanistic-psychology-2795242), the trait approach to personality is focused on differences between individuals. The combination and interaction of various traits form a personality that is unique to each individual. Trait theory is focused on identifying and measuring these individual personality characteristics.1﻿

**Gordon Allport’s Trait Theory**

In 1936, psychologist [Gordon HYPERLINK "https://www.verywellmind.com/gordon-allport-biography-2795508"Allport](https://www.verywellmind.com/gordon-allport-biography-2795508)found that one English-language dictionary alone contained more than 4,000 words describing [different personality traits](https://www.verywellmind.com/how-many-personality-traits-are-there-2795430). He categorized these traits into three levels:2﻿

[**Cardinal Traits**](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-cardinal-traits-2794966)**:** These are traits that dominate an individual’s whole life, often to the point that the person becomes known specifically for these traits.

People with such personalities can become so well-known for these traits that their names are often synonymous with these qualities. Consider the origin and meaning of the following descriptive terms: Machiavellian, narcissistic, Don Juan, Christ-like, etc.

Allport suggested that cardinal traits are rare and tend to develop later in life.

**Central Traits:** These are the general characteristics that form the basic foundations of personality. These central traits, while not as dominating as cardinal traits are the major characteristics you might use to describe another person.

Terms such as "intelligent," "honest," "shy," and "anxious" are considered central traits.

**Secondary Traits:** These are the traits that are sometimes related to attitudes or preferences. They often appear only in certain situations or under specific circumstances. Some examples would be getting anxious when speaking to a group or impatient while waiting in line.

**Raymond Cattell’s Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire**

Trait theorist [Raymond Cattell](https://www.verywellmind.com/raymond-cattell-biography-1905-1998-2795518) reduced the number of main personality traits from Allport’s initial list of over 4,000 down to 171. He did so primarily by eliminating uncommon traits and combining common characteristics.

Next, Cattell rated a large sample of individuals for these 171 different traits. Then, using a statistical technique known as factor analysis, he identified closely related terms and eventually reduced his list to just 16 key personality traits.

According to Cattell, these 16 traits are the source of all human personality. He also developed one of the most widely used personality assessments known as the "Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire."3﻿

[Analyzing Personality Factors for Counseling and Career Guidance](https://www.verywellmind.com/cattells-16-personality-factors-2795977)

**Eysenck’s Three Dimensions of Personality**

British psychologist [Hans HYPERLINK "https://www.verywellmind.com/hans-eysenck-1916-1997-2795509"Eysenck](https://www.verywellmind.com/hans-eysenck-1916-1997-2795509)developed a model of personality based upon just three universal trails.4﻿

**Introversion/Extraversion:**Introversioninvolves directing attention to inner experiences, while [extroversion](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-extroversion-2795994) relates to focusing attention outward on other people and the environment. A person high in introversion might be quiet and reserved, while an individual high in extraversion might be sociable and outgoing.

**Neuroticism/Emotional Stability:**This dimension of Eysenck’s trait theory is related to moodiness versus even-temperateness. Neuroticism refers to an individual’s tendency to become upset or emotional, while stability refers to the tendency to remain emotionally constant.

**Psychoticism:**Later, after studying individuals suffering from mental illness, Eysenck added a personality dimension he called psychoticism to his trait theory. Individuals who are high on this trait tend to have difficulty dealing with reality and may be antisocial, hostile, non-[empathetic](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-empathy-2795562), and manipulative.

**The Five-Factor Theory of Personality**

Both Cattell’s and Eysenck’s theory have been the subject of considerable research. This has led some theorists to believe that Cattell focused on too many traits, while Eysenck focused on too few. As a result, a new trait theory often referred to as the "Big Five" theory emerged.

This five-factor model of personality represents five core traits that interact to form human personality.5﻿ While researchers often disagree about the exact labels for each dimension, the following are described most commonly:

* Extraversion
* Agreeableness
* Conscientiousness
* Neuroticism
* Openness

[The Big 5 Personality Traits](https://www.verywellmind.com/the-big-five-personality-dimensions-2795422)

**Assessing the Trait Approach to Personality**

Most theorists and psychologists agree that people can be described based on their personality traits. Yet, theorists continue to debate the number of basic traits that make up human personality. While trait theory has an objectivity that some personality theories lack (such as Freud’s psychoanalytic theory), it also has weaknesses.

Some of the most common criticisms of trait theory center on the fact that traits are often poor predictors of behavior. While an individual may score high on assessments of a specific trait, he may not always behave that way in every situation. Another problem is those trait theories do not address how or why individual differences in personality develop or emerge.

F **Behaviorist Theories**

The school of behaviorism emerged in the 1910s, led by **John B. Watson**. Unlike psychodynamic theorists, behaviorists study only observable behavior. Their explanations of personality focus on learning. Skinner, Bandura, and Walter Mischel all proposed important behaviorist theories.

B. F. Skinner’s Ideas

As described in Chapter 7, “Learning and Conditioning,” **B. F. Skinner** is well known for describing the principles of operant conditioning. Skinner believed that the environment determines behavior. According to his view, people have consistent behavior patterns because they have particular kinds of **Response Tendencies**. This means that over time, people learn to behave in particular ways. Behaviors that have positive consequences tend to increase, while behaviors that have negative consequences tend to decrease.

Skinner didn’t think that childhood played an especially important role in shaping personality. Instead, he thought that personality develops over the whole life span. People’s responses change as they encounter new situations.

**Example:**When Jeff was young, he lived in the suburbs. He developed a liking for fast driving because his friends enjoyed riding with him and he never got speeding tickets. After he left college, though, he moved to the city. Whenever he drove fast, he got a speeding ticket. Also, his new friends were much more cautious about driving in fast cars. Now Jeff doesn’t like to drive fast and considers himself to be a cautious person.

Albert Bandura’s Ideas

**Albert Bandura**pointed out that people learn to respond in particular ways by watching other people, who are called models. See Chapter 7, “Learning and Conditioning,” for more information on Bandura’s research on observational learning.

Although Bandura agrees that personality arises through learning, he believes that conditioning is not an automatic, mechanical process. He and other theorists believe that cognitive processes like thinking and reasoning are important in learning. The kind of behaviorism they advocate is called social-cognitive learning.

**Whom Do We Imitate?**

Research has shown that people are more likely to imitate some models than others. People tend to imitate models they like or admire and models they consider attractive and powerful. People are also more likely to imitate models who seem similar to themselves. Furthermore, if people see models being rewarded for their behavior, they will be more likely to imitate those models. Advertisers often use these research results when they design ads. For example, ads that try to persuade young adults to purchase a certain brand of soft drink often show young, attractive models who are being rewarded with good times for their soda-drinking behavior.o

**Walter Mischel**, like Bandura, is a social-cognitive theorist. Mischel’s research showed that situations have a strong effect on people’s behavior and that people’s responses to situations depend on their thoughts about the likely consequences of their behavior. Mischel’s research caused considerable debate because it cast doubt on the idea of stable personality traits. Mischel himself did not want to abandon the idea of stable personality traits. He believed that researchers should pay attention to both situational and personal characteristics that influence behavior.

Today, most psychologists acknowledge that both a person’s characteristics and the specific situation at hand influence how a person behaves. Personal characteristics include innate temperaments, learned habits, and beliefs. The environment includes opportunities, rewards, punishments, and chance occurrences. Personality results from a two-way interaction between a person’s characteristics and the environment. This process of interaction is called **Reciprocal Determinism**. People’s characteristics influence the kind of environment in which they find themselves. Those environments, in turn, influence and modify people’s personal characteristics.llow

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**Criticism on bhv. domains**

* Behaviorist researchers often do animal studies of behavior and then generalize their results to human beings. Generalizing results in this way can be misleading, since humans have complex thought processes that affect behavior.
* Behaviorists often underestimate the importance of biological factors.
* By emphasizing the situational influences on personality, some social-cognitive theorists underestimate the importance of personality traits.

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**Humanistics paradigm**

Some psychologists at the time disliked psychodynamic and behaviorist explanations of personality. They felt that these theories ignored the qualities that make humans unique among animals, such as striving for self-determination and self-realization. In the 1950s, some of these psychologists began a school of psychology called **Humanism**.

Humanistic psychologists try to see people’s lives as those people would see them. They tend to have an optimistic perspective on human nature. They focus on the ability of human beings to think consciously and rationally, to control their biological urges, and to achieve their full potential. In the humanistic view, people are responsible for their lives and actions and have the freedom and will to change their attitudes and behavior.

Two psychologists, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, became well known for their humanistic theories.

Abraham Maslow’s Theory

The highest rung on **Abraham Maslow**’s ladder of human motives is the need for **Self-Actualization**. Maslow said that human beings strive for self-actualization, or realization of their full potential, once they have satisfied their more basic needs. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory is described on page 247.

Maslow also provided his own account of the healthy human personality. Psychodynamic theories tend to be based on clinical case studies and therefore lack accounts of healthy personalities. To come up with his account, Maslow studied exceptional historical figures, such as Abraham Lincoln and Eleanor Roosevelt, as well as some of his own contemporaries whom he thought had exceptionally good mental health.

* **Awareness and acceptance of themselves**
* **Openness and spontaneity**
* **The ability to enjoy work and see work as a mission to fulfill**
* **The ability to develop close friendships without being overly dependent on other people**
* **A good sense of humor**
* **The tendency to have peak experiences that are spiritually or emotionally satisfying**

Carl Rogers’s Person-Centered Theory

**Carl Rogers**, another humanistic psychologist, proposed a theory called the **Person-Centered Theory**. Like Freud, Rogers drew on clinical case studies to come up with his theory. He also drew from the ideas of Maslow and others. In Rogers’s view, the**Self-Concept** is the most important feature of personality, and it includes all the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs people have about themselves. Rogers believed that people are aware of their self-concepts.

*Congruence and Incongruence*

Rogers said that people’s self-concepts often do not exactly match reality. For example, a person may consider himself to be very honest but often lies to his boss about why he is late to work. Rogers used the term **Incongruence** to refer to the discrepancy between the self-concept and reality. **Congruence**, on the other hand, is a fairly accurate match between the self-concept and reality.

According to Rogers, parents promote incongruence if they give their children conditional love. If a parent accepts a child only when the child behaves a particular way, the child is likely to block out experiences that are considered unacceptable. On the other hand, if the parent shows unconditional love, the child can develop congruence. Adults whose parents provided conditional love would continue in adulthood to distort their experiences in order to feel accepted.

*Results of Incongruence*

Rogers thought that people experience anxiety when their self-concepts are threatened. To protect themselves from anxiety, people distort their experiences so that they can hold on to their self-concept. People who have a high degree of incongruence are likely to feel very anxious because reality continually threatens their self-concepts.

***Example:****Erin believes she is a very generous person, although she is often stingy with her money and usually leaves small tips or no tips at restaurants. When a dining companion comments on her tipping behavior, she insists that the tips she leaves are proportional to the service she gets. By attributing her tipping behavior to bad service, she can avoid anxiety and maintain her self-concept of being generous.*

**Criticisms of Humanistic Theories**

Humanistic theories have had a significant influence on psychology as well as pop culture. Many psychologists now accept the idea that when it comes to personality, people’s subjective experiences have more weight than objective reality. Humanistic psychologists’ focus on healthy people, rather than troubled people, has also been a particularly useful contribution.