THE TRAIT APPROACH: DEFINING OUR DIFFERENCES

Traits define a person’s predominant thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Five personality dimensions have been identified— extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience—the so-called Big Five. There has been debate, however, about how useful the Big Five dimensions are for describing personalities across cultures.

One challenge to trait theories is the personality paradox: people often behave less consistently than might be expected. Part of the explanation for this paradox is the power of the situation. Most theorists now believe that both personality and situations matter, usually in interaction, and some theorists describe personalities in terms of an if . . . then . . . pattern: “If in this setting, then act in this fashion; if in that setting, then act in that fashion.” Some people are more consistent in their behaviors than others; this complexity is assessed by the Self-Monitoring Scale.

Traits grow to some extent out of the individual’s temperament, or characteristic emotional or behavioral pattern. Twin studies of the Big Five dimensions confirm a high heritability. In the case of extraversion, genetic influences may depend on each individual’s level of central nervous system reactivity, with introverts more reactive than extraverts. A similar logic has been used to explain sensation seeking and inhibited temperament.

Studies of national character underline the importance of cultural differences in personality. Family effects are also important, but they reflect differences within families (e.g., contrasts between first-borns and second-borns) rather than differences between families. The correlation between the personality traits of adopted children and their adoptive siblings is essentially zero, and the correlations between the traits of identical twins reared together are comparable to those of identical twins reared apart.

THE PSYCHODYNAMIC APPROACH: PROBING THE DEPTHS

The psychodynamic approach to personality is derived from Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis. Freud distinguished three subsystems of personality: the id, a blind striving toward biological satisfaction that follows the pleasure principle; the ego, a system that tries to reconcile id-derived needs with the actualities of the world; and the superego, which represents the internalized rules of the parents and punishes deviations through feelings of guilt.

According to Freud, internal conflict gives rise to anxiety, which leads a child to push the forbidden thoughts out of consciousness. Repression is the primary vehicle for this, but the repressed materials may surface again, demanding the use of other defense mechanisms, including displacement, reaction formation, rationalization, and projection.

According to Freud, the child passes through specific stages of psychosexual development, with each stage characterized by the erogenous zones through which gratification is obtained. Freud proposed that during the phallic stage, the boys develop the Oedipus complex and girls develop the Electra complex.

Freud drew evidence from several sources, including the errors that people make in everyday life. He also felt that dreams hold important clues about the unconscious mind, although it was crucial to understand a dream’s latent content and not just its manifest content. Another source of information about the unconscious comes from the study of myths and legends, which may give insights into our collective unconscious.

After Freud, psychodynamic theorists, called ego psychologists, focused on the skills and adaptive capacities of the ego. They emphasized coping patterns, which show considerable consistency over an individual’s lifetime. Other psychodynamic theorists, called object relations theorists, focused on the relations an individual has with others

**THE HUMANISTIC APPROACH: APPRECIATING OUR POTENTIAL**

The humanistic approach maintains that what is most important about people is how they achieve their own selfhood and actualize their potential. This approach emphasizes phenomenology, or each person’s own unique perspective based on that person’s construal, or interpretation of the world around him.

This perspective emphasizes positive human motives, such as self-actualization, rather than what it calls deficiency needs. According to Carl Rogers’ self theory, children only achieve a solid sense of personal self-worth if they have experienced a sense of unconditional positive regard.

Self-schemas play a powerful role in determining a person’s self-esteem. The content of self-schema vary by culture.

Many themes stressed by humanistic psychologists underlie a more recent movement called positive psychology, which has led to a number of empirical investigations regarding positive subjective experiences, positive individual traits, and positive social institutions.

**THE SOCIAL-COGNITIVE APPROACH: THE POWER OF BELIEFS**

Social-cognitive theorists focus on the various cognitive characteristics along which personalities may differ. Albert Bandura emphasizes the role of experience, through which individuals develop outcome expectations that govern their actions; individuals also develop a sense of self-efficacy. Walter Mischel has emphasized the way people interpret the world around them, and also their competencies and self-regulatory plans.

Social-cognitive theorists emphasize the notion of control— a person’s ability to do what he wants to do.

They also emphasize attributional style, the way a person typically explains the things that happen in his or her life.

A third crucial construct is self-control, which refers to an individual’s ability to refrain from doing what he wants to do in order to get something he wants even more. The importance of self-control is reflected in evidence that 4-year-olds who are able to tolerate delay of gratification show more social and academic competence in adolescence.