

Introduction to Trait Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson will identify key aspects of the trait theory of personality. Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. Personality Traits
2. Types of Traits

1. Personality Traits

The theory of personality focuses on personality traits, but what exactly is a personality trait?

Personality traits are the basic, stable, and consistent qualities that people show over time and in different kinds of situations. These are the building blocks of a person's self. Essentially, they are the qualities we put together to describe who a person is and what they're like. Personality traits can have an influence on our behaviors.

➦ **EXAMPLE** For instance, if somebody is an angry or irritable person, they may be more prone to act out of anger or violence.

A **trait theorist** is a personality psychologist that conducts a scientific study of personality to identify and measure these particular aspects of a person's personality. This area of study is considered reductive as a theory, like structuralism, because it tries to break it down into the smallest possible parts.



TERMS TO KNOW

Personality Trait

The basic and stable and consistent qualities people show over time and in different situations; the building blocks of a person's self, or sense of who they are

Trait Theorist

A personality psychologist that attempts to identify and measure particular aspects or pieces of a person's personality (or traits)

2. Contributions of Allport

One of the founding figures in trait theory of personality is Gordon Allport. Allport studied and lived during the first half of the 1900s. His major contribution to personality trait theory was the identification of different levels and categories of traits.

He developed the idea of general versus specific traits in personality.

Type	Description	Example
Common Traits	Also considered a general trait. Common traits are traits that are recognized and shared by most people within a certain culture.	In the United States, competitiveness is a trait that is shared and valued by people. However, collective or more group-oriented cultures in Africa or Asia might not value the trait of competitiveness as highly.
Individual Traits	Specific traits are individual traits that a person has; these are unique and specific to each person over time. Individual traits are the focus of our trait theories. Within individual traits, Allport further identified levels of importance for those traits. He developed what is called Allport's "Lexical Hypothesis" and identified 18,000 words representing traits in the dictionary. He organized these into levels of traits.	A person from the U.S. may be a shy and less outgoing person while still sharing the general trait of competitiveness with someone from another region.
Cardinal Traits	People might consider certain traits as being more important or more influential to their own ideas and behavior. A cardinal trait is the most influential and important trait that can be in a person, and this trait is essentially behind every kind of action that the person takes. Cardinal traits are very rare, since people are generally not defined by a single trait.	Mother Teresa has a cardinal trait of kindness, because this trait essentially guided all of her actions during her life.}
Central Traits	This type of trait is probably the most important to the trait theory. Central traits are the prominent, influential traits that are at the core of the personality. They don't completely define a person, but do influence the way that people usually act.	A person might be humorous, intelligent, or shy.
Secondary Traits	This type of trait is considerably less influential. These can be things like preferences in what you like about food or colors. It could also be certain kinds of traits that are only shown in certain situations or circumstances.	A person might only be shy or anxious when speaking in public, but otherwise might be an outgoing person.



TERMS TO KNOW

Common Traits

Traits shared by most members of a specific culture

Individual Traits

Specific person's unique personality traits

Allport's "Lexical Hypothesis"

Gordon Allport identified 18,000 words representing traits in the dictionary and organized these into levels of traits

Cardinal Traits

Traits that are so basic that all of a person's activities can be traced back to the trait

Central Traits

Core qualities of a personality; major characteristics you would use to describe an individual

Secondary Traits

Preferences that are dependent on the environment



SUMMARY

Today's lesson has focused on the **theory of personality** and personality traits, which are the basic and consistent qualities people exhibit. These are studied by trait theorists trying to break down personality into its basic components. Gordon Allport is one of the founding fathers of trait theory. The **contributions of Allport** include identifying and creating levels for traits.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Erick Taggart.



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