Traits & Trait Taxonomies

Chapter 3

Three fundamental questions guide those who study traits:

• How should we conceptualize traits?
• How can we identify which traits are the most important from among the many ways that individuals differ?
• How can we formulate a comprehensive taxonomy of traits—a system that includes within it all the major traits of personality?
Identification of the Most Important Traits: Three Approaches

- Lexical Approach
- Statistical Approach
- Theoretical Approach

Lexical Approach

- Starts with lexical hypothesis: All important individual differences have become encoded within the natural language over time
- Trait terms are important for people in communicating with others
Lexical Approach

• Two criteria for identifying important traits
  – Synonym frequency
  – Cross-cultural universality

Lexical Approach

• Problems and limitations
  – Many traits are ambiguous, metaphorical, obscure, or difficult
  – Personality is conveyed through different parts of speech (not just adjectives), including nouns and adverbs
Lexical Approach

• Lexical approach is a good starting point for identifying important individual difference, but should not be the exclusive approach used

Statistical Approach

• Starts with a large, diverse pool of personality items
• Most researchers using lexical approach turn to statistical approach to distill ratings of trait adjectives into basic categories of traits
• Goal of statistical approach is to identify major dimensions of personality
Statistical Approach

Factor analysis

• Identifies groups of items that covary or go together, but tend not to covary with other groups of items
• Provides means for determining which personality variables share some property or belong within the same group

Statistical Approach

Factor analysis

• Useful in reducing the large array of diverse traits into smaller, more useful set of underlying factors
• Factor loading: Index of how much of a variation in an item is “explained” by a factor
Statistical Approach

Factor analysis

• Cautionary note: You only get out of factor analysis what you put in; thus, researchers must pay attention to the initial selection items

Theoretical Approach

• Starts with a theory, which then determines which variables are important
• Example: Sociosexual orientation (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991)
• Strengths coincide with strengths of a theory, and weaknesses coincide with the weaknesses of a theory
Taxonomies of Personality

- Eysenck’s Hierarchical Model of Personality
- Cattell’s Taxonomy: The 16 Personality Factor System
- Circumplex Taxonomies of Personality: The Wiggins Circumplex (1979)
- Five-Factor Model

Eysenck’s Hierarchical Model of Personality

- Model of personality based on traits that Eysenck believed were highly heritable and had psychophysiological foundation
Eysenck’s Hierarchical Model of Personality

• **Extraversion**: High scorers like partiers, have many friends, require people around to talk to, like playing practical jokes on others, display carefree, easy manner, and have a high activity level

Eysenck’s Hierarchical Model of Personality

• **Neuroticism**: High scorers are worriers, anxious, depressed, have trouble sleeping, experience array of psychosomatic symptoms, and over-reactivity of negative emotions
Eysenck’s Hierarchical Model of Personality

• **Psychoticism**: High scorers are solitary, lack empathy, often cruel and inhumane, insensitivity to pain and suffering of others, aggressive, penchant for strange and unusual, impulsive, and has antisocial tendencies

Cattell’s Taxonomy: The 16 Personality Factor System

• Cattell’s goal was to identify and measure the basic units of personality
• Believed that the true factors of personality should be found across different types of data, such as self-reports and laboratory tests
Cattell’s Taxonomy: The 16 Personality Factor System

• Identified 16 factors
• Major criticisms
  – Some personality researchers have failed to replicate the 16 factors
  – Many argue that a smaller number of factors captures important ways in which individuals differ

Five-Factor Model

• Five broad factors:
  1. Surgency (a.k.a. Extraversion)
  2. Agreeableness,
  3. Conscientiousness,
  4. Emotional Stability,
  5. Openness/Intellect
• Originally based on the combination of lexical and statistical approaches
• Big Five taxonomy has achieved a greater degree of consensus than any other trait taxonomy in the history of personality trait psychology
Five-Factor Model

Empirical Evidence for Five-Factor Model

— Replicable in studies using English language trait words as items
— Found by more than a dozen researchers using different samples
— Replicated in different languages

Five-Factor Model

Empirical Evidence for Five-Factor Model

— Replicated in every decade for the past half century, suggesting five-factor solution replicable over time
— Replicated using different item formats
Five-Factor Model

• The troublesome fifth factor: Some disagreement remains about the content and replicability of fifth factor
• Empirical correlates of the five factors
• Personality-descriptive nouns

Five-Factor Model

• Is the five-factor model comprehensive? Possible omissions include positive evaluation, negative evaluation, masculinity/femininity, religiosity or spirituality, attractiveness, sexuality
Summary and Evaluation

• There are different approaches to identifying the important traits
• Personality psychologists sometimes blend the approaches
• Formulating an overarching taxonomy of personality traits is fundamental