

# 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 an 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