

Chapter 4

Theoretical and Measurement Issues in Trait Psychology

Theoretical Issues

- Meaningful Differences Between Individuals
- Consistency Over Time
- Consistency Across Situations
- Person-Situation Interaction
- Aggregation

Meaningful Differences Between Individuals

- There are meaningful differences between individuals (traits psychology is also called differential psychology)
 - People differ in amounts of traits, and differences can be accurately measured
 - According to trait psychologists, every personality is the product of a combination of a few basic, primary traits

Consistency Over Time

- Research indicates consistency over time for broad traits
- Although consistent over time, how a trait is manifested in behavior might change over time
- How can there be consistency in a trait if it is known to change with age (e.g., impulsivity)?
Focus on the rank order differences between people

Consistency Across Situations

- Trait psychologists traditionally assumed cross-situation consistency
- If situations mainly control how people behave, then the existence or relevance of traits questionable
- Hartshorne and May (1928): Low cross-situation consistency is in honesty, helpfulness, self-control

Consistency Across Situations

- Mischel (1968): Personality psychologists should abandon their efforts to explain behavior with traits, focusing instead on situations
- Situationism: If behavior varies across situations, then situational differences and not personality traits determine behavior

Consistency Across Situations

- Mischel's (1968) critique encouraged debate in personality psychology about the importance of traits compared to situations in causing behavior
- Both sides tempered views: Trait psychologists acknowledged the importance of situation, and situationists acknowledged the importance of traits

Consistency Across Situations

- Debate led to two lasting changes: Focus on Person-Situation Interaction and Practice of Aggregation

Person-Situation Interaction

- Two possible explanations for behavior:
 - Behavior is a function of personality traits
 - Behavior is a function of situation

Person-Situation Interaction

Integration: Personality and situation interact
to produce behavior

- Differences between people make a difference only under certain circumstances
- Situational specificity: Certain situations can provoke behavior that is out of character for an individual

Person-Situation Interaction

Integration: Personality and situation interact to produce behavior

- Strong situation: Situations in which most people react in a similar way (e.g., grief following loss of loved one)
- When situations are weak or ambiguous, personality has its strongest influence

Person-Situation Interaction

- Three additional ways in which personality and situation interact to produce behavior
 - Selection
 - Evocation
 - Manipulation

Person-Situation Interaction

- Selection: Tendency to choose or select situations in which one finds oneself, as a function of personality
- Evocation: Certain personality traits may evoke specific responses from others
- Manipulation: Various means by which people influence the behavior of others; tactics of manipulation vary with personality

Aggregation

- Longer tests are more reliable than shorter ones and are better measures of traits
- Single behavior or occasion may be influenced by extenuating circumstances unrelated to personality

Aggregation

- Aggregation implies that traits are only one influence on behavior
- Aggregation also implies that traits refer to the person's average level
- Thus, personality psychologists will never be good at predicting single acts or single occasions

Measurement Issues

- Trait approach relies on self-report surveys to measure personality
- Personality psychologists assume that people differ in the amounts of various traits, and so a key measurement issue is determining how much of trait person has

Measurement Issues

- Traits are often represented as dimensions along which people differ
- Trait psychologists are aware of and address circumstances that affect accuracy, reliability, validity, and utility of self-report trait measures

Measurement Issues

- Carelessness
- Faking On Questionnaires
- Response Sets
- Integrity Testing

Measurement Issues

Carelessness

- Method for detecting such problems is an infrequency scale embedded in test
- Infrequency scale contains items that most people answer in a particular way

Measurement Issues

Carelessness

- If a participant answers differently than most, this suggests carelessness
- Another method for detecting carelessness is to include duplicate items spaced far apart in the survey—if the person answers the same item differently, this suggests carelessness

Measurement Issues

Faking On Questionnaires

- “Fake good”: Attempt to appear better off or better adjusted than one is
- “Fake bad”: Attempt to appear worse off or less adjusted than one is
- Method to detect is to a devise scale that, if answered in particular way, suggests faking

Measurement Issues

Response Sets

- Acquiescence: Tendency to agree with items, regardless of content; psychologists counteract by reverse-keying some items
- Extreme responding: Tendency to give endpoint responses
- Social desirability: Tendency to answer items in such a way so that one comes across as socially attractive or likable

Measurement Issues

Two Views On Social Desirability

- Represents distortion and should be eliminated or reduced
- Valid part of other desirable personality traits, such as agreeableness, and should be studied

Beware of Barnum Statements in Personality Test Interpretations

- Barnum statement: generality that could apply to anyone

Measurement Issues

Integrity Testing: A Closer Look

- Integrity tests are surveys designed to assess whether a person is generally honest or dishonest; replaced polygraph
- When assessed against the “big five” personality traits, integrity is the combination of high conscientiousness, high agreeableness, and low neuroticism

Personality and Prediction

- Whether someone does well in an employment setting may be determined, in part, by whether a person’s personality traits mesh with job requirements
- Personality traits may predict who is likely to do well in particular job, so it makes sense to select people for employment based on measures of traits

Personality and Prediction

- But using tests to select employees has limitations and potential liabilities
- Lawsuits have challenged the use of tests on the grounds ranging from discrimination, to invasion of privacy, to freedom of religion

Personality and Prediction

- Most employers receive overall test scores, however, not the applicant's answers to specific questions
- In 1978, the EEOC standardized federal guidelines for the use of tests in employment selection

Personality and Prediction

- Two main concerns that the employer must satisfy to use for employment selection
 - Test must predict performance on a specific job or jobs like the one people are being selected for
 - Test must not be biased or have “undue impact” on persons from protected groups, such as women and minorities

Personnel selection: Choosing the Right Person for Job

- Personality tests frequently used to screen out “wrong” individuals from a pool of applicants for police officers
- Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)

Personnel selection: Choosing the Right Person for Job

- California Personality Inventory (CPI)
- 16 Personality Factor (16PF) Questionnaire

Selection in Business Settings: The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)

- MBTI is most widely used personality assessment device in business settings
- Assesses eight fundamental preferences, which reduce to four scores:
 - Extraverted versus introverted
 - Sensing or intuitive
 - Thinking or feelings
 - Judging or perceiving

Selection in Business Settings: The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)

- Four scores combined to yield 16 types
- MBTI used widely to select applicants for leadership positions
- But criticism, especially regarding reliability and predictive validity

Summary and Evaluation

- Hallmark of trait perspective is the emphasis on the differences between people
- Traits psychologists assume that people will be relatively constant over time and across situations in behaviors, because of their differences in various traits

Summary and Evaluation

- Traits are more likely to influence a person's behavior when the situation is weak and ambiguous and doesn't push for conformity from all people
- Personality traits refer to the average tendencies in behavior

Summary and Evaluation

- Trait psychologists are interested in the accuracy of measurement
- Interest in measurement and prediction has led trait psychologists to apply these skills to the selection or screening of job applicants and other situations where personality might make a difference