

AI Acknowledgment Statement

I have used AI to assist me in restructuring my sentences and paragraphs to add more consistency and flow to my essay. I have used softwares such as ChatGBT to rephrase and Grammarly to structure. I have asked prompts to only restructure and refine my own work.

Traits, defined as stable and consistent patterns of behaviour, collectively form an individual's personality. These traits exist on a spectrum and, when combined, create a complex framework that both explains present behaviour and helps predict future actions. Behaviour refers to how an individual presents themselves across different situations, whether alone, in social settings, or within professional environments. The conscious and unconscious decisions a person makes are therefore heavily influenced by their underlying personality structure.

Personality can also be understood as a reflection of both internal and external influences. Factors such as upbringing, social environment, physical appearance, and personal perceptions all contribute to how an individual interprets the world. These interpretations, in turn, become evident through their behaviour. In this sense, behaviour acts as an outward expression of internal traits shaped by experience.

To explore this further, this discussion will examine key trait theories and apply them to observable behaviours, highlighting how different traits may correlate or interact with one another. Additionally, it will evaluate the strengths and limitations of these theories, considering how effectively they explain the complexity of human personality and behaviour.

According to Hippocrates in the 5th century BC, personality was determined by the balance of the four humours. He proposed that an excess or deficiency of blood, phlegm, yellow bile, or black bile would result in distinct personality types, with imbalances leading to more extreme traits. (Editors, 2026)

In contrast, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, Freud introduced a psychodynamic perspective, suggesting that personality arises from the interaction between the id, ego, and superego. He argued that behaviour is shaped by internal

conflicts between unconscious sexual desires and the expectations imposed by society. (Freud, 1923)

Despite their differences, both theories share a common limitation: they largely exclude individual agency. In each case, personality is portrayed as something determined by internal forces beyond conscious control, leaving little room for personal choice. While these approaches highlight the influence of internal processes and the conflict between desire and societal norms, they fail to clearly define or categorise the specific traits that make up an individual's personality.

This gap led to the development of trait theory, with Gordon Allport as one of its earliest contributors. In 1937. He aimed to systematically identify and categorise personality by analysing descriptive language, identifying around 4,500 trait-related words. He grouped these into three types: cardinal, central, and secondary traits.

Cardinal traits are rare and dominant, often defining an individual's entire personality, as seen in figures such as Mother Teresa. Central traits form the core characteristics of a person, such as honesty, while secondary traits are more context-dependent and may affect how honest that person would be in that time and place. This suggests that while traits describe consistent behaviour, they can still be influenced by context. Allport supported his approach using qualitative methods, such as the Letters from Jenny (1946), where he analysed personal writings to identify recurring patterns in language and infer personality traits. Also known as a qualitative experiment.

However, Allport's theory can be criticised for being overly simplistic, as it tends to categorise traits in a more fixed, "black and white" manner rather than measuring

them along a continuum. While it may label an individual as honest or dishonest, it fails to account for the complexity of behaviour, such as the specific contexts in which honesty is expressed. As a result, the theory overlooks how traits can vary in intensity and across different situations, limiting its ability to fully explain individual differences in behaviour.

Moving on to Cattell (1946), who used factor analysis to measure behaviours rather than centralize them. Using Allport's list of traits, he narrowed them down to the 16 most relevant traits based on trends and importance. Each of these traits had a direct opposite, where someone could slide anywhere in the middle of the trait warmth, from being outgoing to reserved. This was hugely influential as it allowed human personalities to be as complex as they naturally are. It could explain how you may relate to someone with traits aligning, such as social boldness, yet differ in warmth, so you may be less likely to get along.

One criticism of this approach is its complexity. Methods such as lengthy questionnaires can be influenced by bias, temporary moods, or situational factors, and the sheer number of variables involved introduces a degree of subjectivity. Compared to Allport's more qualitative and descriptive approach, this method is more structured and potentially useful for the future of personality assessment, particularly in standardised testing and research.

Hans Eysenck (1976) proposed a biologically based trait theory, the PEN model, suggesting that individual differences in behaviour could be explained along three

major dimensions: Extraversion and introversion, neuroticism and emotional stability, and psychoticism and impulse control. He argued that these traits are largely inherited and linked to physiological differences in the brain, making them more measurable and predictive than earlier approaches like Allport's. Using questionnaires and factor analysis, Eysenck was able to place individuals along these dimensions, providing a framework to explain why people behave differently across similar situations. For instance, if someone scores high in neuroticism, they would possess traits such as insecurity and nervousness, whereas someone who scores low would be able to handle their emotions more efficiently.

Eysenck's approach, in contrast to Cattell's, is narrower in scope. While it is more structured and measurable than Allport's, it considers fewer factors and therefore risks oversimplifying personality. His model is highly reductionist, attempting to explain complex behavioural patterns solely through biological mechanisms, which may fail to capture the full, nuanced nature of human personality. However, this focus on internal traits can be challenged by considering external influences that individuals have little control over.

The halo effect demonstrates how perception can shape the traits we assign to others. In the 1972 study "*What Is Beautiful Is Good*" by Dion, Berscheid, and Walster, participants rated individuals with higher physical attractiveness as possessing more positive personality traits, such as success and happiness. Similarly, Nisbett and Wilson (1977) found that a lecturer was perceived as more physically attractive when he behaved warmly compared to when he appeared cold, despite no change in appearance.

This suggests that behaviour and personality judgements are not determined solely by internal traits, but are also influenced by external perception and social bias. Therefore, while Eysenck's model attempts to biologically explain individual differences in behaviour, it may overlook the dynamic interaction between traits, behaviour, and social context. This limitation can be applied to trait theories more broadly. Behaviour is influenced not only by internal traits, but also by who we interact with, when these interactions occur, and how others perceive us in that moment. As a result, the expression of personality can vary depending on circumstance, suggesting that behaviour is partly shaped by chance and social context rather than being entirely stable or predictable.

The "Big Five" is the most well-known and academically accepted model of personality in psychology. OCEAN: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, improves on earlier trait theories by providing a more concise, scientifically supported, and measurable framework, allowing for a more accurate explanation of individual differences in behaviour. It is widely used in areas such as mental health and employment, where it can help predict patterns of behaviour and attitudes in the workplace. For example, individuals high in agreeableness are often perceived as trustworthy and cooperative, making them more suited to roles requiring teamwork and communication.

However, despite its strengths, the Big Five still cannot fully account for the complexity of human behaviour. Traits may indicate general tendencies, but they do not always predict how an individual will act in specific situations. External influences, such as social context, perception, and interactions with others, can significantly alter how traits are expressed. This supports the idea that behaviour is

not solely determined by stable internal characteristics, but is also shaped by situational factors and chance.

In conclusion, trait theories provide a useful framework for understanding and predicting general patterns of behaviour, particularly when comparing individuals on a broad scale. However, they are more effective at predicting average behaviour rather than specific actions in unique situations. While traits such as honesty or agreeableness may suggest how a person is likely to behave, they cannot fully account for the dynamic and context-dependent nature of human interaction. Therefore, although trait theories are valuable in explaining individual differences, they remain limited in capturing the full complexity of personality and behaviour.

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