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This essay is going to explore trait theories and how they help to measure and understand personality. There will be focus on Cattell's theory and the big five theory and then on how personality traits impact academic performance. Personality is a combination of aspects that make an individual different from others (Oxford learners dictionaries, 2020). Personality includes major traits, an individual's morals and values, their interests and hobbies and their emotional patterns (American Psychological Association, 2025).

A personality trait is a characteristic that remains stable throughout many different situations (Maltby et al., 2017). An example of a personality trait is extraversion (Smillie, 2019). Although an extravert may be chattier in social situations than in a professional situation, in both situations they would be more outgoing than an introvert (Maltby et al., 2017). This example demonstrates how the trait is stable despite the behaviour being different. The shared goal of trait theories is to discover and measure personality characteristics that make each person unique (Miller, 2024). Understanding these characteristics will help professionals predict behaviour and outcomes, this then allows them to help individuals achieve better outcomes and guiding them to become successful (Miller, 2024).

The first trait theory that is going to be explored is Cattell's 16 personality factors. Cattell defined personality as the characteristics that allow prediction of how an individual will behave in different situations (Maltby et al., 2017). Before Cattell there was a model that identified over 4000 personality traits, Cattell narrowed this down to 16 personality traits (Miller, 2024). He did this due to the idea that characteristics such

as creativity and leadership skills can be predicted from the core personality traits (Cattell & Mead, 2008). He believed that everyone has all 16 traits, but will each have different levels of the traits (Miller, 2024). He developed the 16-personality factor questionnaire (16PF), this measures where an individual falls on the spectrum of each personality trait (Miller, 2024). For example, a person may have high levels of extraversion or low levels of extraversion. The 16PF is a detailed assessment which allows for a big picture of an individual's personality, and this allows psychologists or anyone using the assessment to make predictions of an individual's behaviour based off their traits (Cattell & Mead, 2008).

Cattell emphasised the importance of the difference between surface traits and source traits. Surface traits are easily identified traits, and these tend to cluster together (Maltby et al., 2017). Some examples of surface traits are hopefulness, carelessness, sociable. An individual who is highly sociable will most likely score highly in the other surface traits listed above as well (Maltby et al., 2017). Due to the correlation between surface traits Cattell then concluded that there must be an underlying trait which Cattell named source traits. These traits are responsible for the surface traits, for the examples above the source trait would be extraversion, in the questionnaire extraversion would be measured based on the score of the surface trait (Maltby et al., 2017). Cattell proposed that the source traits describe personality on a broader level whereas the surface traits are what makes an individual unique. The surface traits are the traits that are most important when predicting behaviour (Cattell & Mead, 2008). This is because you could have two extraverts who behave completely differently. One may be hyper and centre of attention; where someone else is highly sociable but calm.

The main strength of the 16PF is that it gives a detailed picture of an individual's whole personality. Another strength is that it can be used in a variety of different disciplines for example occupational, clinical, counselling and more. Due to how detailed the assessment is it can help understand an individual's self-esteem, capacity for stress, empathy levels and so much more (Cattell, 2001). A criticism the assessment has received is that it is too long and the same results could be achieved with less factors (Cattell & Krug, 1986). Another criticism is that the results require someone with psychological knowledge to interpret effectively (Personality Tests, 2025).

Another trait theory is the five-factor model produced by Paul Costa and Robert McCrae (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The five-factor model is based on the idea that there are 5 basic elements to personality (McCrae & John, 1992). These are extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness and neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1992). These five basic traits interact to form the basis of personality (Miller, 2024). It has been suggested that these five personality traits are able to account for many individual differences regarding personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1991).

Based off Costa and McCrae's ideas, a personality assessment was produced to measure these 5 traits effectively. The newest version of the assessment is called the NEO-PI-3. This assessment measures where on the spectrum an individual falls relating to the personality traits, everyone will possess some level of each personality trait (clinicaltoolslibrary, 2025). The NEO is used by clinicians, counsellors and other professionals to help them understand the individual they are working with (Costa and McCrae, 2008). Using the NEO in practice can help professionals predict how well the

individual is going to participate in support based on their levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness (Costa and McCrae, 2008).

The five-factor model has been highly researched by many different professionals, this means that most professionals agree that these 5 factors can explain structure of personalities (Maltby et al., 2017). Due to the amount of research that has been done this model accounts for cultural differences which allows it to be used for different populations (Personality Tests, 2025). While there are many positives to this model, it is also important to consider the limitations. The model views personality broadly, this makes it likely that important personality details may be missed and some personality aspects may not be captured (Personality Tests, 2025).

One of the traits that can be measured is conscientiousness, which is an individual's sense of responsibility (Grice, 2019). Studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between high levels of conscientiousness and academic performance (Conrad & Patry, 2012). This means that those who have high levels of the personality trait conscientiousness tend to get higher grades than those with low levels (Conrad & Patry, 2012). This information can help predict how they may behave when they have an upcoming assignment. Due to the fact they have high levels of conscientiousness this suggests they care about their grades. This then predicts that the student will plan the task well, start it plenty of time before the deadline and hand it in on time (Cattell & Mead, 2008).

Two more of the five core traits are associated with positive academic performance (Chen et al., 2025). Agreeableness is one of the traits that shown a positive relationship with academic performance, this is due to the fact individuals with

high levels of agreeableness collaborate well and establish relationships easily (Chen et al., 2025). This can then result in good social support surrounding the individual, this can include positive relationships with teachers as well as peers (Chen et al., 2025). Being able to receive good social support contributes positively to academic performance (Chen et al., 2025). The other trait that has positive relationship with academic performance is openness (Chen et al., 2025). This is because the trait openness is associated with cognitive flexibility and complex problem solving, these cognitive skills contribute to academic performance (Chen et al., 2025).

A trait that can negatively impact academic performance is neuroticism (Pandey & Date, 2024). Someone who has high levels of the neuroticism trait will be more prone to experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, guilt, shame (Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017). Studies show that there is a negative relationship between neuroticism and academic performance (Pandey & Date, 2024). This is because of many different reasons, one being that stress caused by academics may deeply impact an individual with high levels of neuroticism (Pandey & Date, 2024). High levels of academic stress can negatively impact grades and increase the likelihood of dropping out (Pascoe et al., 2019). From this research it can be predicted that those with high levels of neuroticism will struggle with motivation and paying attention (Pandey & Date, 2024).

Overall, trait theories try to describe and predict behaviour by using personality tests to understand how traits can influence behaviour (Maltby et al., 2017). The 5 core traits of personality have been explored in this essay and then linked to how they may impact academic performance. It is important to understand why and how personality

traits impact academic performance because the students can receive support to work on the behaviours that may be causing negative issues for academics (Chen et al., 2025).

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