

Personality and individual differences

In essence, the study of personality is an attempt to answer a simple question: why are people behaving differently when faced with the same situation? Trait theories have long provided the most influential answer, suggesting that the actions of people are driven by internal, stable dispositions that stay relatively consistent throughout their lives. This field has come a long way from Hippocrates/Galen theory of the four types of personality to what we know today.

Throughout the development of sophisticated statistical tools like factor analysis, research such as Raymond Cattell and Hans Eysenck began to strip away the noise of human language to find the underlying structure of who we are. Today, this effort has largely culminated in the Five-Factor model (FFM), a framework that has become the gold standard for psychometric testing. However, the idea that a person can be reduce to five scores on a test is not without critics.

While trait theories are fantastic at predicting broad patterns of behaviour, like how a conscientious individual passed his driving test without any mistakes, they often struggle to explain how the same individual might act different or out of character in a high stress environment.

This essay will trace the evolution of personality measurements from its historical roots to contemporary models, comparing the biological focus of Eysenck with the descriptive power of the Big Five, and in the end evaluating whether traits alone can truly account for the complexity of individual behaviour.

Before the Big Factor model that we know today, an older theory of personality came from the ancient Greek, from the philosopher Hippocrates. Later Galen took it and developed it, being today known as Hippocrates/Galen personality or temperament theory.

Based on the humoral theory, they came up with four types of personality. Too much black bile in the body will make people melancholic, giving signs of depression; too much yellow bile will make individuals choleric or sad making them aggressive; too much phlegm in the body can make people calm or phlegmatic, describing a lazy or dull individual; and too much blood in the body will result in a sanguine personality, a person described as happy or fun to be around. The main problem in this theory is that Galen and Hippocrates thought that if a person has one type of personality, he cannot have another, while the modern discoveries in personality traits disagree.

Hans Eysenck was a psychologist that based his own theory of personality on the Greek model of personality types. His two dimensions of

temperament are Neuroticism and Extraversion or as is more known Introversion and Extraversion, theory that still appears in some personality models today. Later Eysenck added a new dimension to his theory, after the work he did with his wife Sybil Eysenck. The new dimension is Psychoticism, scoring high is creativity, sensation seeking and low in rationality, altruism and empathy.

Another theory of personality was developed by Cattell (1905-98) who argued that there are 16 major dimensions of personality. After systematic and exhausting analysis of the English Language, he assumed that every personality of an individual can be described by existing words. This is called a lexical hypothesis, and it was conducted by Allport and Odbert in 1936, they found 17.953 words to describe “psychological aspects” (Chamorro-Premuzic 2015). After analysing the words, Cattell realized that different words described the same trait, he ended up with 4500, reducing it in time just to 16 personality traits.

Another theory originated from a lexical hypothesis is the famous Big Five Model. Even if the theory is lacking theoretical rationale, there were a lot of empirical evidence to support The Big Five. One of the empirical pieces of evidence is of Costa and McCrae (1989) factor analysis on MBTI, demonstrating support for the Big Five or how Boyle (1989) found strong connection between Big Five and Cattell’s 16PF and Eysenck Gigantic Three.

The Big Five theory consists in five major personality traits: neuroticism, extroversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness.

Neuroticism is the first personality trait from the Big Five theory, individuals with high neuroticism are usually anxious, depressed, impulsive, self-conscious and angry. The second personality trait is extraversion, and it refers to individuals experiencing positive emotions, impulsive and that can socialize easily. The next dimension is openness to experience and is described by someone that engage in intellectual activities, often refers at a creative individual with an intellectual creativity. Social individuals are most of the time categorised in the agreeableness trait, that is specific for its altruism, modesty and trust. Agreeableness in people is seen like caring, friendly and having a predisposition to social behaviour. The last personality trait from the Big Five is conscientiousness, from an individual high is conscientiousness, can be expected to be disciplined, to be proactive and achievement striving.

Even if there are not so many studies that investigated the association between being liked as an adult and personality trait, there are some literatures that examine the association of personality traits and being liked as a child. The personality traits most associated with having more friends and being welcome between children were agreeableness and extraversion. Things start to change when the children become adults, a study has shown “that not all socially desirable traits may be associated with being liked” (Wojciszke and colleagues,

2009). Meaning that even if a person has a personality trait that has good adjectives associated to them, is not 100% for sure that person is going to be popular or liked by others. When a personality trait looks for others interest like being nice and dependent, is more likely to have more friends than a personality trait that is looking for his own interest, like intelligence and assertiveness. Something that plays a good part in making friends is realizing that people usually help others that seem to help back, if necessary, and the same is with being liked, because usually people will like people that are nice, and would act nice with people that they like.

While the Five Factor Model (FFM) provides the theory of personality traits, the Revised NEO personality inventory NEO PI-R, developed by Costa and McCrae in 1992, serves as its primary diagnostic instrument. Unlike before, shorter scale, the NEO PI-R is a comprehensive 240 item questionnaire designed to measure the Big Five traits at a gradual level. It does it by breaking each of the five major domains into six specific facets. For example, under the domain of extraversion, the test measure sub traits like warmth, gregariousness and assertiveness. This level of detail is crucial for accounting for individual differences in behaviour, two people might both score high in extroversion, but the NEO PI-R can reveal the one that is driven by need for excitement while the other is simply high altruistic and warm. Because of its high reliability and validity, the NEO PI-R has become the benchmark for psychometric testing,

allowing researchers to move beyond Western populations to test these personality structures are truly universal.

A study from Romania from 2014 conducted by Dragos Iliescu and colleagues, wanted to prove if the Big Five Model that was developed in US, works in different cultural context. The researchers needed to translate and adapt the NEO PI-R first. They found that the structure of personality in Romania is almost identical to that of the US and other Western cultures. The study supports the universalist view of trait theory saying that the five dimensions of personality are a fundamental part of being human, regardless of where people live. While the Big Five structure held up, the researchers noted that a specific facet might show slight variation in how they are expressed. This supports the idea that while the structure of personality is universal, the behavioural expression of those traits can be shaped by local culture.

In summary, the evolution of trait theories represents a significant shift from the rigid, biological categorization of Hippocrates and Galen to the nuanced, statistically backed framework we use today. While early models like the four humors or Eysenck's three factor system paved the way for understanding personality, it is the Big Factor Model that has provided the most reliable map for measuring individual differences. As evidence using the NEO PI-R and its successful application in diverse cultures like Romania, we can see

the human personality has a universal structure that goes beyond borders. However, as this essay has explored, a high score on a personality inventory is not guarantee of a specific action. While traits provide the blueprint for our tendencies, such how an agreeable child might find it easier to make friends, they do not account for every variable in the person situation equation. Ultimately, trait theories are most effective when viewed not as a set fixed label, but as a lens through which we can predict broad patterns of behaviour while still respecting the role that culture and high stress environments play in shaping our individual responses to the world.

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