

## AI acknowledgement

I acknowledge that I used co-pilot AI to help me find resources for my essay and help create the draft structure of my assignment. I used no other AI for my assignment.

Psychologists specialising in personality psychology aim to explain the different characteristics in individuals, one of the most influential approaches being trait theories. Trait theories are the proposal that personality is made up of measurable traits that influence thought, behaviour, and emotion. A behaviour is described as a collection of observable actions or responses that someone displays, including emotional responses and social interactions. Behaviours widely vary between individuals and trait theories aim to explain these differences and link them to primary characteristics. An example of a basic personality characteristic is conformity, where actions are adjusted to align with societal views or group expectations. Conformity is a highly studied area in social psychology with classic experiments and research including Asch's line judgement experiments, which concluded that people would often change their natural responses to match their group, even in situations where the chosen answer is clearly incorrect. However, people conform to different extents, and trait theories give insight to understanding how these differences are formed. The five factor model (or the big five) influence those who do or do not conform, for example those with high levels of neuroticism are more likely to conform out of fear of rejection. By focusing on social conformity as a crucial behaviour, this essay will explore how trait theories help understand individuals, show empirical evidence of the links between personality and behaviour, the overall limitations of these theories, and discuss how these traits are measured using psychometric tools.

In psychology, there are many theories used to interpret and understand conformity in individuals, the most recognised ones being the Five factor model, Eysenck's PEN model, and Cattell's 16PF. The five factor model was developed by Robert McCrea and Paul Costa in

the early 1980s and is a group of five stable groups that attempt to encapsulate human behaviour, and play a role in understanding conformity (*LibreTexts, 2020*). These five core traits are Agreeableness, Neuroticism, Openness to experience, extraversion and conscientiousness. Neuroticism is described as strong emotional instability, sensitivity to negative emotions such as stress and anxiety, experiencing high levels of neuroticism has been linked to increased likelihood of being influenced to engage with normative behaviours and conforming to reduce anxiety in social environments (*Putri & Febriani, 2025*). Agreeableness represents traits such as empathy, cooperation, and desire to maintain social peace. Those high in agreeableness are more likely to conform to social standards to protect themselves and others from conflict arising, and often prioritise social harmony over their own thoughts, opinions and wants. Low levels of agreeableness cause people to reject normative society and refuse to conform as they are more comfortable expressing disagreement and sharing their views. Openness to experience is considered a cognitive core rather than a social one. Those high in this trait often enjoy new experiences and exploring out of normative boundaries whilst those with lower levels prefer pre-established routines and familiar experiences, leading to greater chances of conformity. Extraversion is understood as an individual's sociability and those who are more extroverted will often conform in large groups to gain approval from peers, whilst people with low levels of extraversion (referred to as introversion or introverted) are likely to conform due to fear of being outcasted and isolated (*IDRlabs, 2026*).

The five factor model has been provided with strong empirical support and is backed by decades of research through a variety of cultures, age groups and methods, and studies consistently show that this model can help predict real life behaviours such as social interaction and conformity. This cross cultural model uses standardised ways of measuring,

for example the NEO-PI-R and BFI-2 and displays validity and strong test retest reliability, showing that these traits are stable and strongly linked to behaviours. Although this model can be useful for predicting behaviours, it has limitations. It describes what people are like, but does not address why these traits develop or mechanisms behind it. Trait scores also lack accountability for situational influences, which Asch's line experiment on conformity shows that strong social influences can override personality, highlighting the significance of situational factors (*BPS, 2025*). In addition, this model is heavily reliant on self report questionnaires which are susceptible to bias due to lack of self awareness.

Eysenck's PEN Model attempts to explain personalities and behaviours using three broad traits, psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism, which were created with biological knowledge of the underlying nervous system. Psychoticism refers to impulsivity, non conformity, low empathy and aggressiveness, those with high levels of psychoticism often reject conformity as their behavioural traits do not align with most social norms and they prefer acting impulsive than changing their behaviour to suit expectations. Extraversion refers to sociability, and the degree that individuals desire external stimulation through socialisation. Eysenck believed that extraverts had 'lower baseline cortical arousal' meaning that they are more likely to desire stimulation from their surrounding environments, including social interactions. This increases conformity in extraverted individuals as they receive this stimulation in group interactions and provides them with approval and engagement (*Bech, 2016*). Neuroticism is categorised as emotional instability and intense reactivity to threat, which Eysenck explains is due to a sensitive reaction in the limbic system and increased autonomic arousal. By giving a biological explanation, the model explains what the traits are and why they take place, giving a scientific answer behind his theory. The

structure of this model is more precise than others, for example Cattell's 16PF. Eysenck's PEN model is also supported by empirical evidence, the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ) shows stable and reliable measurements through studies for extraversion and neuroticism. However, psychoticism is now classed as controversial and poorly defined with less empirical support and overlaps with anti social traits. There is also an overemphasis on biology, and deems environmental, cultural and situational factors less important. The lack of comprehensiveness means that these three traits can not completely demonstrate the complexities of personality.

Cattell's 16PF model shows a wide approach to personality trait theories by presenting 16 different primary traits. Relating to conformity, traits such as social boldness and apprehension directly influence the likelihood to conform to societal norms. High levels of social boldness are more likely to be confident and strong willed, meaning they are less likely to conform for social praise, whilst those displaying low levels in social boldness are more likely to show conformative behaviours to avoid conflict and negative reactions. Apprehension can cause self doubt, fear social disappointment and isolation, and as a result those with high levels of apprehension are likely to conform to reduce anxiety or avoid the negative impacts of non conformity. Experimental work conducted by Crutchfield (1995) implied that conformity levels in all individuals are not equal, and can vary significantly, giving early evidence that conformity is impacted by traits and personality. By offering 16 primary traits, it allows personality to be dissected further and prevents specific traits from overlapping and being miscategorised. The statistical foundation of this theory was created using factor analysis and then formed the 16 traits from the data. The complexity of this theory can make it difficult to interpret and apply compared to similar frameworks, and

whilst researchers attempted to recreate this theory with all 16 traits some studies discovered that the traits could be narrowed to 5 broader categories, and lead to the invention of the five factor model.

Personality is measured and assessed using scientific tools and psychometric assessments such as EPQ, EPI, and NEO-PI-3 which determines the predictive validity and reliability, primarily using self report questionnaires. Behavioural observations measure personality through tasks and capture in person behaviour without bias. Measuring personality and traits using several methods allows for accuracy and prevents biases that self report can cause due to lack of self awareness. These measures understand traits as stable and consistent in all environments which undervalues the significance of situational, cultural and environmental factors.

Trait theories help learn and detect patterns within behaviour and understand important individual differences, from Eysenck's PEN model, the Big Five, and Cattell's 16PF, all of these theories aim to understand how traits shape personality using empirical evidence to support their claims and set the foundations for their theories. Each of these trait theories used psychometric assessments to create tools such as EPI, EPQ, 16PF, and NEO-PI-3 to systematically gather data to support their claims. Although these psychometric assessments are used, there are still many limitations, self report measures are not immune to self bias which significantly impacts traits such as conformity. Some theories are oversimplified (PEN model and the Big Five), whilst others are too broad (Cattell's 16PF). The lack of understanding of the influence of situational factors is also a significant

limitation, and perceiving emotions as stable and not influenced by social, cultural and environment factors affect the accuracy overall. These trait theories have their limitations and strengths but set foundational knowledge and have become valuable in the understanding of human behaviour. They have been backed by empirical, biological, and cross-cultural evidence proving that the quality of these theories is undeniable, but the overall focus on stable dispositions provides only some understanding of human behaviour.

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