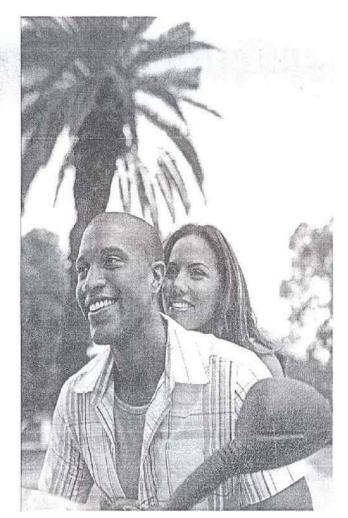# Psychology

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Abstract

Sara was a junior in collegc with a double major in math and computer science. She was a bit shy, especially with men her own age. Although she wanted to date more, she was very particular about the characteristics she looked for in a man. She decided that a Web-based dating service might be an efficient way to find someone to date. She signed up with an Internet dating service and discovered that the first step was to complete an extensive personality inventory. She answered a lot of questions about her likes and dislikes, her habits, traits, and what others thought of her. She even answered questions about the kind of car she owned and her driving style. After this, the site returned the personality profiles of a few men who. the site claimed, would be good matches for her. One looked particularly interesting to her, so she spent a couple of hours with him in online chat sessions. Sarah decided to call him a couple of times on the phone. They had a lot in common and Sarah found it easy to talk to him. She enjoyed the conversations, as did he. so they decided to take the next step and meet in person for a dinner date. When they made arrangements to meet, she was surprised to learn that they lived in the same apartment complex and that they had probably already seen one another, perhaps had even spoken to one another. But it look an Internet dating service, using a program that matches people according to personality, for them to actually find each other.

There are many Internet-based dating services, and many of these use personality psychologists to help them do a better job of matching people. For example, the Web site eHarmony.com uses a 480-item personality questionnaire. The site also presents the applicant with a list of "bad behaviors" and asks them to check off those they "absolutely cannot stand" in someone they date. This dating service uses a combined matching system that relies on selecting matches on major personality traits and then deselecting based on what the applicant says he or she cannot tolerate in another. Other Internet dating services, such as Matchmaker.com and Emode.com, also gather extensive personality data and engage in sophisticated matching routines.

Matching on personality trails sounds like a great idea, but it works only to the extent that people are telling the truth about themselves when they answer the questionnaires. People can represent themselves falsely in terms of physical characteristics (e.g., say they are petite when they are not, say they have thick, wavy hair when they are in fact bald), and they may represent themselves falsely in terms of their personality. They may, for example, try to cover up an aggressive, abusive personality. Consequently, some of these dating services are very concerned about safety and are using techniques from personality assessment to detect potential problem clients. For example, some sites ask about minor misbehaviors, such as "I never resent being asked to return a favor" or "I have, on occasion, told a white lie." People who deny a lot of these common faults raise a red flag because they are probably misrepresenting themselves on all the questionnaires. In fact, eHarmony.com claims that 16 percent of its clients are asked to leave the site based on their answers to such questionnaires (reported in *U.S. News & World Report,* September 29, 2003).

This use of personality testing brings into focus several questions about measurement of traits. Do traits represent consistent behavior patterns, such that we could make accurate predictions about a person's future based on her or his trait standings? How do personality traits interact with situations, particularly social situations? Are there ways to detect (hat someone is not telling (he truth on a personality questionnaire? Arc some people motivated to fake good or to fake bad on questionnaires?

Personality measures are also used in other selection situations, such as for jobs or for prison parole or for placement within an organization. What are some of the legal issues in using personality measures to make such decisions? Arc there some common problems with selection procedures? Can an employer use a measure of "integrity" to screen out potentially dishonest employees? What about selecting people

,A *key task for a first date is determining what you have in common with the other person—that is, how similar your personalities are.*

for admission into college, law school, or medical school on the basis of aptitude tests or other so-called intelligence tests?

Although many of these questions seem abstract, they are important for how wc think about personality traits. They are important for understanding controversial issues, such as the use of personality measures in business, industry, and education for the selection, training, and promotion of candidates.

Trail theories of personality offer a collection of viewpoints about the fundamental building blocks of human nature. As we saw in Chapter 3, there are differences among the various theories concerning what constitutes a trail, how many traits exist, and what are the best methods for discovering basic traits. Despite their differences, trail theories share three important assumptions about personality traits. These assumptions go beyond any one theory or taxonomy of personality traits and, so, form the basic foundation for trait psychology. These three important assumptions are
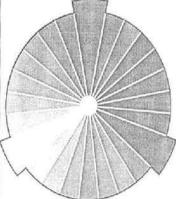
- meaningful individual differences,
- stability or consistency over time, and
- consistency across situations.

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Trait psychologists are primarily interested in determining the ways in which people are *different from each other*. Any meaningful way in which people differ from each other may potentially be identified as a personality trait. Some people like to talk a lot: others don't. Some people are active; others are couch potatoes. Some people enjoy working on difficult puzzles; others avoid mental challenges. Because of its emphasis on the study of differences among people, trait psychology has sometimes been called differential psychology in the interest of distinguishing this field from other branches of personality psychology (Anastasi, 1976). Differential psychology includes the study of other forms of individual differences in addition to personality traits, such as abilities, aptitudes, and intelligence. In this chapter, however, we focus mainly on personality traits.

The trait perspective historically has been concerned with accurate measurement. It takes a quantitative approach, which emphasizes how much a given individual differs from average. Of all the perspectives and strategies for studying personality, the trait approach is the most mathematically and statistically oriented due to its emphasis on amount.

You might be wondering how the vast differences among people could be captured and represented by a few key personality traits. How is it that the uniqueness of every individual can be portrayed by just a few traits? Trait psychologists are somewhat like chemists. They argue that, by combining a few primary traits in various amounts, they can distill the unique qualities of every individual. This process is analogous to that of combining the three primary colors. Every visible color in the spectrum, from dusty mauve to burnt umber, is created through various combinations of the three primary colors: red. green, and blue. According to trait psychologists, every personality, no matter how complex or unusual, is the product of a particular combination of a few basic and primary traits.
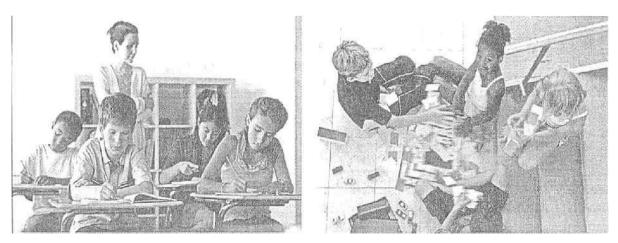

The Color Wheel. The infinite hues of color are created from a combination of three primary colors. Similarly trait psychologists hold that the infinite variety of personalities are created from a combination of a few primary traits.

Consistency Over Time

The second assumption made by all trait theories is that there is a degree of consistency in personality over time. If someone is highly extraverted during one period of observation, trail psychologists (end to assume that he or she will be extraverted tomorrow, nexl week, a year from now, or even decades from now. The view that many broad-based personality traits show considerable stability over time has been supported by a large number of research studies, which we review in Chapter 5. Traits such as intelligence, emotional reactivity, impulsiveness, shyness, and aggression show high tesl-retcst correlations, even with years or decades between measurement occasions, Personality traits that are thought to have a biological basis, such as extraversion, sensation seeking, activity level, and shyness, also show remarkable consistency over time. Attitudes, however, are much less consistent over time, as are interests and opinions (Conley, 1984a, 1984b). Of course, people do change in important behavioral ways throughout adulthood, whether in terms of their political involvement, their attitudes toward social issues, or their participation in social change movements or perhaps through psychotherapy (Stewart, 1982). When it comes to broad personality traits, consistency over time is more often the rule than (he exception (Izard et a)., 1993).

Although a trait might be consistent over time, the way in which it manifests itself in actual behavior might change substantially. Consider the trait of disagreeableness. As a child, a highly disagreeable person might be prone to temper tantrums and (its of breath holding, list pounding, and undirected rage. As an adult, a disagreeable person might be difficult to get along with and hence might have (rouble sustaining personal relationships and holding down a job. Researchers have found, for example, a correlation of -.45 between throwing temper tantrums in childhood and being able to hold a job as an adult 20 years later (Caspi, Elder, & Bern, 1987). This finding is evidence of consistency in the underlying trait (disagreeableness), even though the *manifestation* of that trait changes over time.

What about trails that decrease in intensity with age, such as activity level, impulsiveness, or sociopalhy? How can there be consistency in a trait if it is known

The Iiartshorne and May study examined cross-situational consistency in academic and play situations in children. While they found little evidence for consistency in such traits as honesty, the study has been criticized for measuring behavior on one occasion in each situation. Studies that aggregate measurements over several occasions in each situation find much higher levels of cross-situational consistency.

to change with age? For example, criminal tendencies usually decrease with age, so that a 20-year-old sociopath becomes much less dangerous to society as he or she ages. The answer to this question lies in the concept of **rank order.** If all people show a decrease in a particular trait at the same rate over time, they might slill maintain the same rank order relative to each other. Accounting for general change with age can be compared to subtracting or adding a constant to each participant's score on the trait measure. Figure 4.1 illustrates how a general decrease in impulsiveness with age might have no real effect on the correlation between measures obtained 20 years apart. People in general can show a decrease in impulsiveness as they get older, yet those individuals who were the most impulsive at an earlier age are still the ones who are most impulsive at a later age. We will revisit the idea of rank order consistency, as well as the whole notion of stability and change, in Chapter 5.

Consistency Across Situations

The third assumption made by trait psychologists is that traits will exhibit some consistency across situations. Although the evidence for consistency in traits *over time* is substantial, the question of consistency in traits *from situation to situation* has been more hotly debated. Trait psychologists have traditionally believed that people's personalities show consistency from situation to situation. For example, if a young man is "really friendly," he is expected to be friendly at work, friendly at school, and friendly during recreation activities. This person might be friendly toward strangers, friendly toward people of different ages, and friendly toward authority figures.

Even though someone is really friendly, there are, of course, situations in which the individual will not act friendly. Perhaps a particular situation exerts an influence on how friendly most people will be. For example, people are more likely to start conversations with strangers if they are at a party than if they are at a library. If situations mainly control how people behave, then the idea that traits are consistent across situations holds less promise as an approach to explaining behavior.

The issue of cross-situational consistency has a long and checkered history in personality psychology. Hartshorne and May (1928) studied a large group of elementary school students at summer camp, focusing especially on the trail of honesty. They observed honest and dishonest behavior in several situations. For example, they observed which children cheated while playing lield games at summer camp and which children cheated during some written exams in school. The correlation between honesty measured in each of these two situations was rather low. Knowing that a child cheated one night while playing kick-the-can at summer camp tells us very little about whether this child is likely to copy from a neighbor during a test at school. Hartshorne and May reported similar low cross-situational correlations for the traits of helpfulness and self-conlrol.

Forty years later, in 1968, Walter Mischel published a groundbreaking book entitled *Personality and Assessment*. In it, he summarized the results of the Hartshorne and May study, as well as the results of many other studies reporting low correlations between personality scores obtained in different situations. After reviewing many such findings, Mischel concluded that "behavioral consistencies have not been demonstrated, and the concept of personality traits as broad predispositions is thus untenable" (p. 140).

Mischel suggested that personality psychologists should abandon their efforts to explain behavior in terms of personality traits and recommended that they shift their focus to situations. If behavior differs from situation to situation, then it must be situational differences, rather than underlying personality traits, that determine behavior. This position, called situationism, can be illustrated with the following examples. A young woman may be friendly at school with people she knows but reserved with strangers. Or a young man may want to achieve good grades at school but may not care whether he excels in sports.

Mischel's challenge to the trail approach preoccupied the field of trait psychology for the 20 years following publication of his 1968 book. Many researchers responded to Mischel's situationist approach by formulating new theoretical perspectives and gathering new data designed to rescue the idea of traits (e.g., A. H. Buss, 1989; Endler & Magnusson, 1976). Mischel, in turn, countered with new ideas and new data of his own, intended to reinforce his position that the trail concept was limited in its usefulness (e.g., Mischel, 1984, 1990; Mischel & Peake, 1982).

Although the dust is still settling from this long-running debate, it is safe to say that both trait psychologists *and* Mischel have modified their views as a result. Mischel has tempered his position that situations are always the strongest determinants of behavior. However, he still maintains that trait psychologists have been guilty of overstating the importance of broad trails. Prior to Mischel's critique, it was common for trait psychologists to make statements about the predictability of people's behavior from their scores on personality tests. Mischel points out that psychologists simply are not very good at predicting how *an individual* will behave *in particular situations*. Trait psychologists, too, have modified their views. Two of the most lasting changes that trail psychologists have embraced have been the notion of person-situation interaction and the practice of aggregation, or averaging, as a tool for assessing personality traits.