THEORIES OF PERSONALITY II

TRAIT THEORY

2014
SESSION 7
TRAIT THEORY

Introduction to Trait Theory

Practically all personality theorists are concerned with traits. After all, traits are what make us who we are; they are the relatively permanent aspects of each of us evidenced by the consistency in our interactions. Knowing this, what makes the trait approach to understanding personality different from the other theories?

First of all, while most theories represent attempts at better understanding the development of personality, trait theorists typically talk very little about development. Second, predicting a person's behavior in a given situation is also not a concern for trait theorists. Third, unlike many other theoretical orientations, trait theorists are interested in the comparison of people through based on not just aspects, but also degrees. And finally, and likely the biggest difference, trait theory does not inherently provide a medium of personality change.

In this chapter, we will look at some of the most influential trait theorists and explore different approaches to identifying and understanding human personality traits. Because trait theory is so concerned with identification, we will also discuss various assessment techniques that have become commonplace in the psychological community.

The Functionally Autonomous Central Traits

Gordon Allport was born in Indiana, the youngest of four boys. As a child he felt different from others, both in his childhood play and his interests. After high school followed his older brother Floyd through the same educational path. They went to the same undergraduate program, both attended Harvard for graduate school, and both majored in psychology. Floyd made a name for himself in social psychology, but Gordon felt like an outsider in this arena.

Gordon was interested in personality, and at the time, personality was not a formal sub-discipline of psychology and it certainly was not as fashionable as social psychology. It is likely that Gordon followed his brother through school in an attempt to find himself. He reported feeling different from others, including his older brother. This feeling, however, might have helped him succeed in his chosen profession.

He completed his doctorate, began studying personality. It is said that he was the first professor to teach a college level course on personality theory, a course that today is required by nearly all undergraduate psychology majors.

Prior to graduation, Allport secured a meeting with Sigmund Freud due to his writing on the unconscious and its effect on personality. It was during this meeting, after being probed by Freud for unconscious motives, that Allport wrote that psychologists should give full recognition to manifest motives before delving into the unconscious.

Allport is considered a trait theorist as he believed that every person has a small number of specific traits that predominate in his or her personality. He called these a person's *central traits*. While these central traits share in the make-up of personality, he also argued that occasionally one of them becomes an apparent dominant force. He called this a person's *cardinal trait*.

Both the central traits and the occasional cardinal trait are environmentally influenced. As a child develops, specific behaviors and interactions become a part of the individual's personality. As the person grows, these traits become

functionally autonomous. In other words, they become so much a part of the person that they no longer require whatever it was that caused it to develop.

Psychogenic Needs

Henry Murray's history is anything but a prerequisite for a career in psychology. He earned his bachelor's degree in history in 1915, a medical degree from Columbia in 1919 and then completed a doctorate in biochemistry from Cambridge nine years later.

His start in psychology occurred after reading Jung and eventually arranging a meeting with him. During this meeting, Jung convinced Murray to study psychoanalysis, which he did at Harvard University. After competing his training, Murray actually began teaching psychology and psychoanalytic theory at Harvard, and he remained there for the rest of his professional career.

Although considered a trait theorist, Murray's medical background, combined with his analytical training give a unique flair to his research and writing. This is probably most evident in his development of the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), a personality test designed to determine personality themes as well as unconscious motivation.

He was focused on basic needs in personality which he called psychogenic needs. He believed these needs were largely at the unconscious level. After researching this area, he narrowed these needs down to 27, although the list and names vary depending on the time frame and the author.

Murray's Psychogenic Needs	
Psychogenic Need	**Description of Need**
Abasement	To surrender and accept punishment
Achievement	To overcome obstacles and succeed
Acquisition (Conservance)	To obtain possessions

Affiliation	To make associations and friendships
Aggression	To injure others
Autonomy	To resist others and stand strong
Blameavoidance	To avoid blame and obey the rules
Construction	To build or create
Contrariance	To be unique
Counteraction	To defend honor
Defendance	To justify actions
Deference	To follow a superior, to serve
Dominance (Power)	To control and lead others
Exhibition	To attract attention
Exposition	To provide information, educate
Harmavoidance	To avoid pain
Infavoidance	To avoid failure, shame, or to conceal a weakness
Nurturance	To protect the helpless
Order	To arrange, organize, and be precise
Play	To relieve tension, have fun, or relax
Recognition	To gain approval and social status
Rejection	To exclude another
Sentience	To enjoy sensuous impressions
Sex (Erotic)	To form and enjoy an erotic relationship
Similance	To empathize

Succorance	To seek protection or sympathy
Understanding (Cognizance)	To analyze and experience, to seek knowledge

Murray contended that environmental forces played a significant role in the exhibition of the psychogenic needs. He called the forces "*press*," referring to the pressure they put on us that forces us to act. He further argued for a difference between the real environmental forces, *alpha press*, and those that are merely perceived, *beta press*.

The 27 needs and the forces that press them have stood up to research. Three of these, especially, have been the focus of study: the need for Power, Affiliation, and Achievement.

Power, Affiliation, and Achievement

Three of Murray's Psychogenic Needs have been the focus of considerable research: The Need for Power (nPow), Affiliation (nAff) and Achievement (nAch).

The need for Power refers to the desire or need to impact other people, to control or be in a position of influence. Careers that involve these aspects are better suited for high nPow people, such as teachers, psychologists, journalists, and supervisors. They don't necessarily make the best leaders though. Research has found that those with high nPow are more likely to rate an employee higher if that employee has a tendency to schmooz or flatter the subject where those with low or moderate nPow rate employees the same. In this sense, those with high nPow would do well if they also had traits of self-control and objectivity.

The need for affiliation has a long history of research, and studies show that those with a high nAff often have a larger social circle. They spend more time interacting with other such as talking on the phone and writing letters, and they are more likely to be members of social groups or clubs. Those with high nAff are

also more likely to get lonely than those low in nAff, so their need for affiliation may be related to their sense of self and their desire for external stimulation.

Those with a high need for achievement (nAch) demonstrate a consistent concern about meeting obligations and accomplishing tasks. They are, however, more focused on internal motivation rather than external rewards. For example, those high in nAch are more likely to value intelligence and personal achievement over recognition and praise.

There are also cultural and gender differences among these three needs. For example, the United States is higher on ratings of nAch than other countries whose focus is more on relationships and nAff. Men and women also demonstrate their needs in different manners. Men with high nPow tend to be more risk takers and act out more readily while women tend to be more active in volunteer activities.

 Combined with other personality aspects of traits, such as introversion/extroversion, the needs may also show themselves in very different manners. Introverts may demonstrate their high nAff through small groups and intellectual pursuits, while extroverts evidence this same need through large gatherings and louder parties. However they come out, these three needs have shown a consistent pattern in research, perhaps even more so related to humanistic theory than in trait theory itself.

Personality Factors

Raymond B. Cattell entered the field of psychology almost against his own better judgment. After working in a hospital during World War I, he decided that understanding human behavior and interaction is the only way to get beyond the irrationality of the times. While a graduate student at London University, he was hired as a research assistant to Charles Spearman, a mathematician studying the quantification of intelligence.

Spearman, a well known name in the field of intellectual assessment, developed a mathematical formula known as factor analysis. This statistical technique allows one to take raw data and determine groupings of data. In other words, if you and many others took a general test that had both math and English

questions, a factor analysis would likely determine that there were two factors or groupings on this test. Imagine the power of this technique for lesser understood concepts such as intelligence and personality.

By developing questionnaires and tests consisting of personality characteristics, and analyzing data from report cards of students, evaluations from employees, etc., Cattell applied this new statistical technique. In 1949, he published his findings in an assessment device known as the 16PF. According to Cattell's research, human personality traits could be summarized by 16 personality factors (PF) or main traits.

He described these 16 traits on a continuum. In other words, everybody has some degree of every trait, according to Cattell. The key to assessment is determining where on the continuum an individual falls. The 16 traits are shown in the chart below.

Cattell's 16 Personality Factors	
Abstractedness	imaginative versus practical
Apprehension	insecure versus complacent
Dominance	aggressive versus passive
Emotional Stability	calm and stable versus high-strung and
Liveliness	enthusiastic versus serious
Openness to Change	liberal versus traditional
Perfectionism	compulsive and controlled versus indifferent
Privateness	pretentious versus unpretentious
Reasoning	abstract versus concrete
Rule Consciousness	moralistic versus free-thinking
Self-Reliance	leader versus follower

Sensitivity	sensitive versus tough-minded
Social Boldness	uninhibited versus timid
Tension	driven and tense versus relaxed and easy going
Vigilance	suspicious versus accepting
Warmth	open and warmhearted versus aloof and critical

The OCEAN of Personality

If you look at the theories we've discussed so far, not only within the trait theory camp, but also those of Hans Eysenck and even Sigmund Freud, you may start to notice some commonalities. Many different researchers, from different schools of thought have studied the aspects of personality and several interesting similarities have evolved. While different theorists may use different terminology, five factors or personality traits have shown up in a rather consistent pattern.

These traits, now known as the Big Five are Openness to experience, Conscientiousness, Extroversion/introversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. These five traits, according to many, make up the OCEAN of human personality, as the acronym goes, and are often considered to be the basic traits under which all other aspects of personality fall.

Openness to experience refers to the dimension ranging from outgoing, liberal, interested in new things, and imaginative to reserved, conservative, traditional, and conforming. Like all of these five traits, people will fall somewhere on a continuum, with most falling somewhere in the middle.

Conscientiousness refers to the continuum ranging from organized, careful, and determined to careless, and weak willed. Those on the high end of this factor may be seen as stoic, cold, and methodical. Those on the low end may be seen as gullible, followers, or may see the needs of others as always superceding their own.

Extroversion refers to a person who prefers group activities, group sports,

large gatherings, lots of friends and acquaintances, loud music, and social endeavors. An introvert prefers more solitude, quiet music, small groups or individual sports and would rather stay at home or engage in a small group activity than attend a party or large social gathering. We've even found that extroverts tend to get bored more easily and may be followers who seek out others to avoid this boredom. Introverts, on the other hand, tend to become anxious more easily, especially in larger groups, and prefer the individual activity to avoid this anxiety, and as more of an individualist, may be seen as more of a leader.

Agreeableness represents the extremes of stubborn versus easy going or suspicious versus trusting. Those high in agreeableness are helpful, sympathetic to others, and understanding. Those low on this trait are seen as argumentative, skeptical, and strong-willed.

Finally, neuroticism refers to the dimension of emotional stability. Someone high on neuroticism would exhibit an instability in his or her emotions, interactions, and relationships. They may have frequent and wide mood swings, be difficult to understand, and become more upset over daily stressors and interactions. The person low on neuroticism may be seen as reserved, calm, and perhaps even unemotional.

Application of Trait Theory

One of the most obvious applications of understanding human traits is our ability to then measure these traits. We've discussed some of the assessment devices based on trait theory: The Thematic Apperception Test, 16PF, and tests designed to measure the Big Five. Most of the assessment devices that result from trait theory are self-report type tests. In other words, the person being tested responds to questions and these responses may or may not be accurate. People can lie on a test, they can fake bad or fake good, or they can purposefully try to manipulate the results.

If you are taking a test for a sales job and asked questions regarding your level of extroversion/introversion, is it likely that you might lie or stretch the truth a little to get the job? If you are an introvert, you may feel this would hinder your chances. So instead, you respond positively to the extrovert questions such as "I prefer social activities to solitary activities, " or "I enjoy being the center of attention."

One assessment device that has attempted to address these issues is the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory. The MMPI-2 (now in it's second addition) consists of 567 item to which a test taker responds either true or false. The response styles or factors have been determined based on statistics and depending on how you respond, you will fall on a continuum of an increasing number of traits. The main traits include disorder related categories such as depression, psychotic, histrionic (neurotic), introversion, masculinity/femininity (gender role), and hypochondriasis. This test is so well researched that there are literally over a hundred of these scales now represented.

The MMPI-2 utilizes several techniques that attempt to catch a person who is attempting to alter the results. It asks questions in a specific way as to determine what's called a response style. A response style is a person's tendency to be honest, fake good, or fake bad. And, research suggests that it does a fairly good job of this, especially with people who are less knowledgeable about psychological testing.

Another application of trait theory has been in the workplace. A great deal of research has gone into the determination of traits that are helpful in specific types of jobs. For example, a sales person would likely do better if she is an extrovert, a teacher more likely to succeed if he is conscientious, or a navy seal more likely to get the job done if he is confident and open to new experiences.

Many career type assessment measures look at personality traits and compare you traits with those who are successful in a specific career. If most successful and happy psychologists are conscientious, agreeable,

understanding introverts and you have these same traits, we could say that you are likely to succeed as a psychologist. Based on your traits, we could use assessment to determine careers or college majors that fit your personality and therefore offer you a greater chance of success.

Strengths and Criticisms of Trait Theory

While trait theory may seem logical and strait forward, like any theory on personality, it has both its good points and its criticisms.

Strengths

Objectivity. Perhaps the biggest strength of trait theory is it's reliance on statistical or objective data. Unlike many other theories, the subjectivity or personal experience of the theorists play no role in trait theory. Freud's relationship with his mother, Adler's childhood illness, or Jung's belief in mythology could be said to have influenced their theories. In that sense, subjectivity may have biased their ideas. Trait theory has no bias.

Ease of Use and Understanding. Trait theory has been used to develop a number of assessment devices. It provides an easy to understand continuum that provides a good deal of information regarding a person's personality, interaction, and beliefs about the self and the world. Understanding traits allows us to compare people, to determine which traits allow a person to do better in college, in relationships, or in a specific career. We can help guide people toward a more agreeable future by knowing how they interact with the world.

Criticisms

Poor Predictor of Future Behavior. While we may be able to say, in general that a person falls on the high end or low end of a specific trait, trait theory fails to address a person's state. A state is a temporary way

of interacting and dealing with the self and others. For example, an introvert may be quiet, reserved, intellectual, and calm in most situations. When around close friends, however, he may seem quite outgoing, fun-loving, and excitable.   The same could be said for the extrovert who, when presented with a job interview, may act more introverted, shy, reserved, and intellectual.

Does not Address Development. While statistics may be a strength of trait theory, it may also be it's biggest criticism. Because it is based on statistics rather than theory, it provides no explanation of personality development. Where most theories argue for the development (past), the current personality (present) and provide a means for change (future), trait theory is stuck in the present.

No Means of Change. Perhaps because trait theory does little to offer ideas about trait development, it also provides little or no guidance in the changing of negative aspects of a trait. Without understanding how a trait develops, how do we then change that trait? Many argue that the application of trait theory is significantly reduced because it lacks a means for change. What good is to measure something or to know something if we can do nothing about it?