

Module 58

Trait Theories

Module Learning Objectives

- 58-1** Explain how psychologists use traits to describe personality.
- 58-2** Describe personality inventories, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses as trait-assessment tools.
- 58-3** Identify the traits that seem to provide the most useful information about personality variation.
- 58-4** Discuss whether research supports the consistency of personality traits over time and across situations.



58-1 How do psychologists use traits to describe personality?

Rather than focusing on unconscious forces and thwarted growth opportunities, some researchers attempt to define personality in terms of stable and enduring behavior patterns, such as Sam Gamgee's loyalty and optimism. This perspective can be traced in part to a remarkable meeting in 1919, when Gordon Allport, a curious 22-year-old psychology student, interviewed Sigmund Freud in Vienna. Allport soon discovered just how preoccupied the founder of psychoanalysis was with finding hidden motives, even in Allport's own behavior during the interview. That experience ultimately led Allport to do what Freud did not do—to describe personality in terms of fundamental **traits**—people's characteristic behaviors and conscious motives (such as the curiosity that actually motivated Allport to see Freud). Meeting Freud, said Allport, "taught me that [psychoanalysis], for all its merits, may plunge too deep, and that psychologists would do well to give full recognition to manifest motives before probing the unconscious." Allport came to define personality in terms of identifiable behavior patterns. He was concerned less with *explaining* individual traits than with *describing* them.

Like Allport, Isabel Briggs Myers (1987) and her mother, Katharine Briggs, wanted to describe important personality differences. They attempted to sort people according to Carl Jung's personality types, based on their responses to 126 questions. The *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)*, available in 21 languages, has been taken by more than 2 million people a year, mostly for counseling, leadership training, and work-team development (CPP, 2008). It offers choices, such as "Do you usually value sentiment more than logic, or value logic more than sentiment?" Then it counts the test-taker's preferences, labels them as indicating, say, a "feeling type" or "thinking type," and feeds them back to the person in complimentary terms. Feeling types, for example, are told they are sensitive to values and are "sympathetic, appreciative, and tactful"; thinking types are told they "prefer an objective standard of truth" and are "good at analyzing." (Every type has its strengths, so everyone is affirmed.)

Most people agree with their announced type profile, which mirrors their declared preferences. They may also accept their label as a basis for being matched with work partners

trait a characteristic pattern of behavior or a disposition to feel and act, as assessed by self-report inventories and peer reports.

and tasks that supposedly suit their temperaments. A National Research Council report noted, however, that despite the test's popularity in business and career counseling, its initial use outran research on its value as a predictor of job performance, and "the popularity of this instrument in the absence of proven scientific worth is troublesome" (Druckman & Bjork, 1991, p. 101; see also Pittenger, 1993). Although research on the MBTI has been accumulating since those cautionary words were expressed, the test remains mostly a counseling and coaching tool, not a research instrument.

Exploring Traits

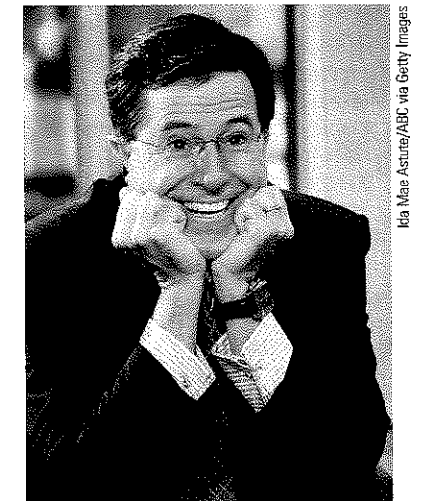
Classifying people as one or another distinct personality type fails to capture their full individuality. We are each a unique complex of multiple traits. So how else could we describe our personalities? We might describe an apple by placing it along several trait dimensions—relatively large or small, red or green, sweet or sour. By placing people on several trait dimensions simultaneously, psychologists can describe countless individual personality variations. (Remember from Module 18 that variations on just three color dimensions—hue, saturation, and brightness—create many thousands of colors.)

What trait dimensions describe personality? If you had an upcoming blind date, what personality traits might give you an accurate sense of the person? Allport and his associate H. S. Odbert (1936) counted all the words in an unabridged dictionary with which one could describe people. There were almost 18,000! How, then, could psychologists condense the list to a manageable number of basic traits?

Factor Analysis

One technique is *factor analysis*, a statistical procedure used to identify clusters of test items that tap basic components of intelligence (such as spatial ability or verbal skill). Imagine that people who describe themselves as outgoing also tend to say that they like excitement and practical jokes and dislike quiet reading. Such a statistically correlated cluster of behaviors reflects a basic factor, or trait—in this case, *extraversion*.

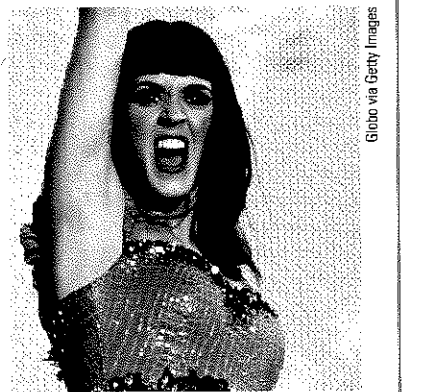
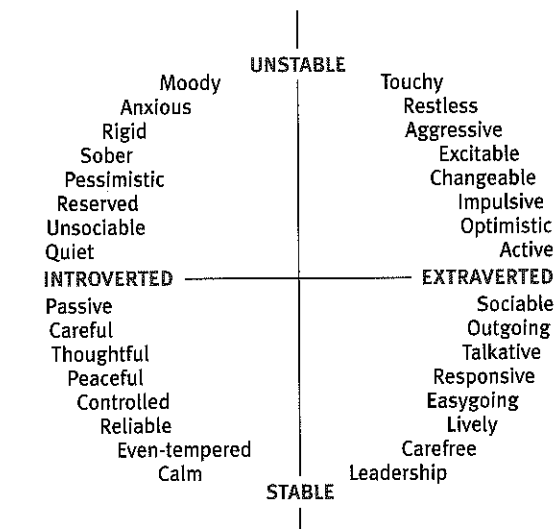
British psychologists Hans Eysenck and Sybil Eysenck [EYE-zink] believed that we can reduce many of our normal individual variations to two or three dimensions, including *extraversion-introversion* and *emotional stability-instability* (**FIGURE 58.1**). People in 35 countries around the world, from China to Uganda to Russia, have taken the *Eysenck Personality Questionnaire*. When their answers were analyzed, the extraversion and emotionality factors inevitably emerged as basic personality dimensions (Eysenck, 1990, 1992). The Eysencks believed that these factors are genetically influenced, and research supports this belief.



Stephen Colbert: The extravert Trait labels such as *extraversion* can describe our temperament and typical behaviors.

Figure 58.1

Two personality dimensions Map makers can tell us a lot by using two axes (north-south and east-west). Two primary personality factors (extraversion-introversion and stability-instability) are similarly useful as axes for describing personality variation. Varying combinations define other, more specific traits. (From Eysenck & Eysenck, 1963.) Those who are naturally introverted, such as primatologist Jane Goodall, may be particularly gifted in field studies. Successful entertainers, including recording artist Katy Perry, are often natural extraverts.



AP® Exam Tip

You are not likely to be asked questions about the specific traits in Figure 58.1. Focus instead on the two main dimensions (extraversion–introversion and stability–instability), and use the traits to get a sense of what the main dimensions mean. For example, stable people demonstrate leadership, and they are calm, even-tempered, and carefree.

personality inventory

a questionnaire (often with *true-false* or *agree-disagree* items) on which people respond to items designed to gauge a wide range of feelings and behaviors; used to assess selected personality traits.

Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)

the most widely researched and clinically used of all personality tests. Originally developed to identify emotional disorders (still considered its most appropriate use), this test is now used for many other screening purposes.

empirically derived test a test (such as the MMPI) developed by testing a pool of items and then selecting those that discriminate between groups.

AP® Exam Tip

This is the third time you've encountered the idea of assessing personality. As with the psychodynamic and humanistic theories, psychologists working from the trait perspective have also tried to establish their own unique ways of measuring personality—in this instance by measuring our traits. There are scientifically sound *personality inventories* in use in psychological research, but beware of the hundreds of self-assessments available online that are neither reliable nor valid.

Biology and Personality

Brain-activity scans of extraverts add to the growing list of traits and mental states that have been explored with brain-imaging procedures. (That list includes intelligence, impulsivity, addictive cravings, lying, sexual attraction, aggressiveness, empathy, spiritual experience, and even racial and political attitudes [Olson, 2005].) Such studies indicate that extraverts seek stimulation because their normal *brain arousal* is relatively low. For example, PET scans show that a frontal lobe area involved in behavior inhibition is less active in extraverts than in introverts (Johnson et al., 1999). Dopamine and dopamine-related neural activity tend to be higher in extraverts (Wacker et al., 2006).

Our biology influences our personality in other ways as well. As you may recall from the twin and adoption studies in Module 14, our *genes* have much to say about the behavioral style that helps define our personality. Jerome Kagan, for example, has attributed differences in children's shyness and inhibition to their *autonomic nervous system reactivity*. Given a reactive autonomic nervous system, we respond to stress with greater anxiety and inhibition. The fearless, curious child may become the rock-climbing or fast-driving adult.

Other researchers report that personality differences among dogs (in energy, affection, reactivity, and curious intelligence) are as evident, and as consistently judged, as personality differences among humans (Gosling et al., 2003; Jones & Gosling, 2005). Monkeys, chimpanzees, orangutans, and even birds also have stable personalities (Weiss et al., 2006). Among the Great Tit (a European relative of the American chickadee), bold birds more quickly inspect new objects and explore trees (Groothuis & Carere, 2005; Verbeek et al., 1994). By selective breeding, researchers can produce bold or shy birds. Both have their place in natural history. In lean years, bold birds are more likely to find food; in abundant years, shy birds feed with less risk.



Erik Lam/Shutterstock

Assessing Traits**58-2 What are personality inventories, and what are their strengths and weaknesses as trait-assessment tools?**

If stable and enduring traits guide our actions, can we devise valid and reliable tests of them? Several trait assessment techniques exist—some more valid than others (see Thinking Critically About: How to Be a “Successful” Astrologer or Palm Reader). Some provide quick assessments of a single trait, such as extraversion, anxiety, or self-esteem. **Personality inventories**—longer questionnaires covering a wide range of feelings and behaviors—assess several traits at once.

The classic personality inventory is the **Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI)**. Although it assesses “abnormal” personality tendencies rather than normal personality traits, the MMPI illustrates a good way of developing a personality inventory. One of its creators, Starke Hathaway (1960), compared his effort with that of Alfred Binet. Binet, as you will see in Module 61, developed the first intelligence test by selecting items that identified children who would probably have trouble progressing normally in French schools. Like Binet's items, the MMPI items were **empirically derived**. From a large pool of items, Hathaway and his colleagues selected those on which particular diagnostic groups differed. They then grouped the questions into 10 clinical scales, including scales that assess depressive tendencies, masculinity–femininity, and introversion–extraversion.

Hathaway and others initially gave hundreds of true-false statements (“No one seems to understand me”; “I get all the sympathy I should”; “I like poetry”) to groups of psychologically disordered patients and to “normal” people. They retained any statement—no matter how silly it sounded—on which the patient group's answer differed from that of the normal group. “Nothing in the newspaper interests me except the comics” may seem senseless, but it just so happened that depressed people were more likely to answer *True*.

Thinking Critically About**How to Be a “Successful” Astrologer or Palm Reader**

“A petite fortune-teller who escapes from prison is a small medium at large.” —ANONYMOUS

Can we discern people's traits from the alignment of the stars and planets at the time of their birth? From their handwriting? From lines on their palms?

Astronomers scoff at the naiveté of astrology—the constellations have shifted in the millennia since astrologers formulated their predictions (Kelly, 1997, 1998). Humorists mock it: “No offense,” writes Dave Barry, “but if you take the horoscope seriously your frontal lobes are the size of Raisinets.” Psychologists instead ask questions: Does it work? Can astrologers surpass chance when given someone's birth date and asked to identify the person from a short lineup of different personality descriptions? Can people pick out their own horoscopes from a lineup of horoscopes? Do people's astrological signs correlate with predicted traits?

The consistent answers have been *No, No, No, and No* (British Psychological Society, 1993; Carlson, 1985; Kelly, 1997; Reichardt, 2010). For example, one researcher examined census data from 20 million married people in England and Wales and found that “astrological sign has no impact on the probability of marrying—and staying married to—someone of any other sign” (Voas, 2008).

Graphologists, who make predictions from handwriting samples, have similarly been found to do no better than chance when trying to discern people's occupations from examining several pages of their handwriting (Beyerstein & Beyerstein, 1992; Dean et al., 1992). Nevertheless, graphologists—and introductory psychology students—will often perceive correlations between personality and handwriting even where there are none (King & Koehler, 2000).

If all these perceived correlations evaporate under close scrutiny, how do astrologers, palm readers, and crystal-ball gazers persuade millions of people worldwide to buy their services? Ray Hyman (1981), palm reader turned research psychologist, has revealed some of their suckering methods.

The first technique, the “stock spiel,” builds on the observation that each of us is in some ways like no one else and in other ways just like everyone. That some things are true of us all enables the “seer” to offer statements that seem impressively accurate: “I sense that you worry about things more than you let on, even to your best friends.” A number of such generally true statements can be combined into a personality description. Imagine that you take a personality test and then receive the following character sketch:



You have a strong need for other people to like and to admire you. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself. . . . You pride yourself on being an independent thinker and do not accept other opinions without satisfactory proof. You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others. At times you are extraverted, affable, sociable; at other times you are introverted, wary, and reserved. Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic (Davies, 1997; Forer, 1949).

In experiments, college students have received stock assessments like this one, drawn from statements in a newsstand astrology book. When they thought the bogus, generic feedback was prepared just for them and when it was favorable, they nearly always rated the description as either “good” or “excellent” (Davies, 1997). Even skeptics, given a flattering description attributed to an astrologer, begin to think that “maybe there's something to this astrology stuff after all” (Glick et al., 1989). An astrologer, it has been said, is someone “prepared to tell you what you think of yourself” (Jones, 2000). This acceptance of stock, positive descriptions is called the *Barnum effect*, named in honor of master showman P. T. Barnum's dictum, “We've got something for everyone.”

A second technique used by seers is to “read” our clothing, physical features, gestures, and reactions. An expensive wedding ring and black dress might, for example, suggest a wealthy woman who was recently widowed.

(continued)

Thinking Critically About *(continued)*

You, too, could read such clues, says Hyman. If people seek you out for a reading, start with some safe sympathy: "I sense you're having some problems lately. You seem unsure what to do. I get the feeling another person is involved." Then tell them what they want to hear. Memorize some Barnum statements from astrology and fortune-telling manuals and use them liberally. Tell people it is their responsibility to cooperate by relating your message to their specific experiences. Later they will recall that you predicted those specific details. Phrase statements as questions, and when you detect a positive response assert the statement strongly. Finally, be a good listener, and later, in different words, reveal to people what they earlier revealed to you. If you dupe them, they will come.

Better yet, beware of those who, by exploiting people with these techniques, are fortune takers rather than fortune tellers.



"Perhaps you'd like a second opinion?"

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(Nevertheless, people have had fun spoofing the MMPI with their own mock items: "Weeping brings tears to my eyes," "Frantic screams make me nervous," and "I stay in the bathtub until I look like a raisin" [Frankel et al., 1983].) Today's MMPI-2 also has scales assessing, for instance, work attitudes, family problems, and anger.

In contrast to the subjectivity of most projective tests, personality inventories are scored objectively—so objectively that a computer can administer and score them. (The computer can also provide descriptions of people who previously responded similarly.) Objectivity does not, however, guarantee validity. For example, individuals taking the MMPI for employment purposes can give socially desirable answers to create a good impression. But in so doing they may also score high on a *lie scale* that assesses faking (as when people respond *false* to a universally true statement such as "I get angry sometimes"). The objectivity of the MMPI has contributed to its popularity and to its translation into more than 100 languages.

The Big Five Factors

58-3 Which traits seem to provide the most useful information about personality variation?

Today's trait researchers believe that simple trait factors, such as the Eysencks' introverted–extraverted and unstable–stable dimensions, are important, but they do not tell the whole story. A slightly expanded set of factors—dubbed the *Big Five*—does a better job (Costa & McCrae, 2009). Work by Paul Costa, Robert McCrae, and others shows that where we fall on these five dimensions (conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion; see **TABLE 58.1**), reveals much of what there is to say about our personality. Around the world—across 56 nations and 29 languages in one study (Schmitt et al., 2007)—people describe others in terms roughly consistent with this list. The Big Five may not be the last word. (Some researchers report it takes only two or three factors—such as conscientiousness, agreeableness, and extraversion—to describe the basic personality dimensions [Block, 2010; De Raad et al., 2010].) But for now, at least, five is the winning number in the personality lottery (Heine & Buchtel, 2009; McCrae, 2009). The Big Five—today's "common currency for personality psychology" (Funder, 2001)—has been the most active personality research topic since the early 1990s and is currently our best approximation of the basic trait dimensions.

Table 58.1 The "Big Five" Personality Factors

(Memory tip: Picturing a CANOE will help you recall these.)

Disorganized Careless Impulsive	Conscientiousness	Organized Careful Disciplined
Ruthless Suspicious Uncooperative	Agreeableness	Soft-hearted Trusting Helpful
Calm Secure Self-satisfied	Neuroticism (emotional stability vs. instability)	Anxious Insecure Self-pitying
Practical Prefers routine Conforming	Openness	Imaginative Prefers variety Independent
Retiring Sober Reserved	Extraversion	Sociable Fun-loving Affectionate

Source: Adapted from McCrae & Costa (1986, 2008).

Steve Wisbauer/Getty Images

AP® Exam Tip

Table 58.1 is an excellent summary of the Big Five personality factors and what they mean.

Big Five research has explored various questions:

- **How stable are these traits?** In adulthood, the Big Five traits are quite stable, with some tendencies (emotional instability, extraversion, and openness) waning a bit during early and middle adulthood, and others (agreeableness and conscientiousness) rising (McCrae, 2011; Vaidya et al., 2002). Conscientiousness increases the most during people's twenties, as people mature and learn to manage their jobs and relationships. Agreeableness increases the most during people's thirties and continues to increase through their sixties (Srivastava et al., 2003).
- **How heritable are they?** Heritability (the extent to which individual differences are attributable to genes) varies with the diversity of people studied, but it generally runs 50 percent or a tad more for each dimension, and genetic influences are similar in different nations (Loehlin et al., 1998; Yamagata et al., 2006). Many genes, each having small effects, combine to influence our traits (McCrae et al., 2010). Researchers have also identified brain areas associated with the various Big Five traits, such as a frontal lobe area that is sensitive to reward and is larger in extraverts (DeYoung et al., 2010).
- **Do the Big Five traits predict our actual behaviors?** Yes. If people report being outgoing, conscientious, and agreeable, "they probably are telling the truth," reports Big Five researcher Robert McCrae (2011). Here are some examples:
 - Shy introverts are more likely than extraverts to prefer communicating by e-mail rather than face-to-face (Hertel et al., 2008).
 - Highly conscientious people earn better high school and university grades (Poropat, 2009). They also are more likely to be morning types (sometimes called "larks"); evening types ("owls") are marginally more extraverted (Jackson & Gerard, 1996).
 - If one partner scores lower than the other on agreeableness, stability, and openness, marital and sexual satisfaction may suffer (Botwin et al., 1997; Donnellan et al., 2004).

- Our traits infuse our language. In text messaging, extraversion predicts use of personal pronouns, agreeableness predicts positive-emotion words, and neuroticism (emotional instability) predicts negative-emotion words (Holtgraves, 2011).

By exploring such questions, Big Five research has sustained trait psychology and renewed appreciation for the importance of personality. Traits matter.

Evaluating Trait Theories

58-4 Does research support the consistency of personality traits over time and across situations?

Are our personality traits stable and enduring? Or does our behavior depend on where and with whom we find ourselves? J.R.R. Tolkien created characters, like the loyal Sam Gamgee, whose personality traits were consistent across various times and places. The Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello had a different view. For him, personality was ever-changing, tailored to the particular role or situation. In one of Pirandello's plays, *Lamberto*, he describes himself: "I am really what you take me to be; though, my dear madam, that does not prevent me from also being really what your husband, my sister, my niece, and Signora Cini take me to be—because they also are absolutely right!" To which Signora Sirelli responds, "In other words you are a different person for each of us."

"There is as much difference between us and ourselves, as between us and others." - MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, *ESSAYS*, 1588

FYI

Roughly speaking, the temporary, external influences on behavior are the focus of social psychology, and the enduring, inner influences are the focus of personality psychology. In actuality, behavior always depends on the interaction of persons with situations.

The Person-Situation Controversy

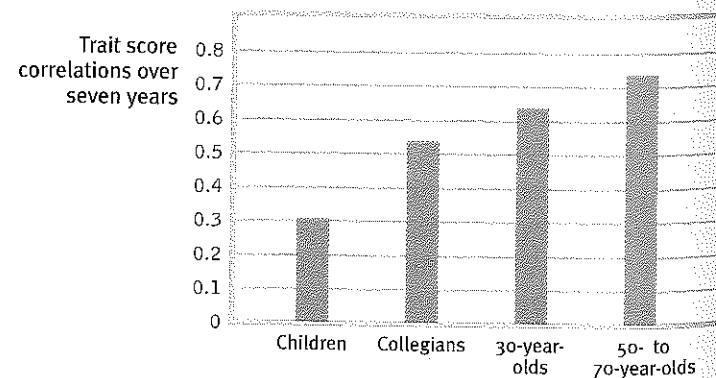
Who, then, typifies human personality, Tolkien's consistent Sam Gamgee or Pirandello's inconsistent *Lamberto*? Both. Our behavior is influenced by the interaction of our inner disposition with our environment. Still, the question lingers: Which is more important? Are we *more* as Tolkien or as Pirandello imagined us to be?

When we explore this *person-situation controversy*, we look for genuine personality traits that persist over time *and* across situations. Are some people dependably conscientious and others unreliable, some cheerful and others dour, some friendly and outgoing and others shy? If we are to consider friendliness a trait, friendly people must act friendly at different times and places. Do they?

In earlier chapters, we considered research that has followed lives through time. We noted that some scholars (especially those who study infants) are impressed with personality change; others are struck by personality stability during adulthood. As **FIGURE 58.2** illustrates, data from 152 long-term studies reveal that personality trait scores are positively correlated with scores obtained seven years later, and that as people grow older their personality stabilizes. Interests may change—the avid collector of tropical fish may become an avid gardener. Careers may change—the determined salesperson may become a determined social worker. Relationships may change—the hostile spouse may start over with a

Figure 58.2

Personality stability With age, personality traits become more stable, as reflected in the stronger correlation of trait scores with follow-up scores seven years later. (Data from Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000.)



new partner. But most people recognize their traits as their own, note Robert McCrae and Paul Costa (1994), "and it is well that they do. A person's recognition of the inevitability of his or her one and only personality is . . . the culminating wisdom of a lifetime."

So most people—including most psychologists—would probably side with Tolkien's assumption of stability of personality traits. Moreover, our traits are socially significant. They influence our health, our thinking, and our job performance (Deary & Matthews, 1993; Hogan, 1998). Studies that follow lives through time show that personality traits rival socioeconomic status and cognitive ability as predictors of mortality, divorce, and occupational attainment (Roberts et al., 2007).

Although our personality *traits* may be both stable and potent, the consistency of our specific *behaviors* from one situation to the next is another matter. As Walter Mischel (1968, 2009) has pointed out, people do not act with predictable consistency. Mischel's studies of college students' conscientiousness revealed but a modest relationship between a student's being conscientious on one occasion (say, showing up for class on time) and being similarly conscientious on another occasion (say, turning in assignments on time). Pirandello would not have been surprised. If you've noticed how outgoing you are in some situations and how reserved you are in others, perhaps you're not surprised either (though for certain traits, Mischel reports, you may accurately assess yourself as more consistent).

This inconsistency in behaviors also makes personality test scores weak predictors of behaviors. People's scores on an extraversion test, for example, do not neatly predict how sociable they actually will be on any given occasion. If we remember such results, says Mischel, we will be more cautious about labeling and pigeonholing individuals. Years in advance, science can tell us the phase of the Moon for any given date. A day in advance, meteorologists can often predict the weather. But we are much further from being able to predict how *you* will feel and act tomorrow.

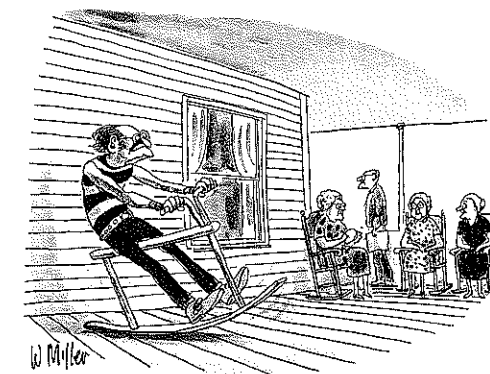
However, people's *average* outgoingness, happiness, or carelessness over many situations is predictable (Epstein, 1983a,b). When rating someone's shyness or agreeableness, this consistency enables people who know someone well to agree on their ratings (Kenrick & Funder, 1988). By collecting snippets of people's daily experience via body-worn recording devices, Matthias Mehl and his colleagues (2006) confirmed that extraverts really do talk more. (I have repeatedly vowed to cut back on my jabbering and joking during my noontime pickup basketball games with friends. Alas, moments later, the irrepressible chatterbox inevitably reoccupies my body.) As our best friends can verify, we do have genetically influenced personality traits. And those traits even lurk in our

- *music preferences*. Classical, jazz, blues, and folk music lovers tend to be open to experience and verbally intelligent; country, pop, and religious music lovers tend to be cheerful, outgoing, and conscientious (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003, 2006). On first meeting, students often disclose their music preferences to one another; in doing so, they are swapping information about their personalities.

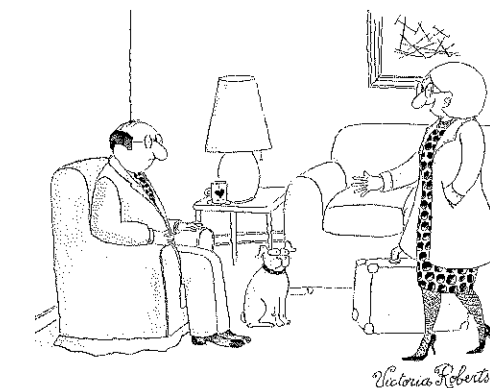
- *bedrooms and offices*. Our personal spaces display our identity and leave a behavioral residue (in our scattered laundry or neat desktop). And that helps explain why just a few minutes' inspection of our living and working spaces can enable someone to assess with reasonable accuracy our conscientiousness, our openness to new experiences, and even our emotional stability (Gosling et al., 2002, 2008).



ICP-UK/Alamy



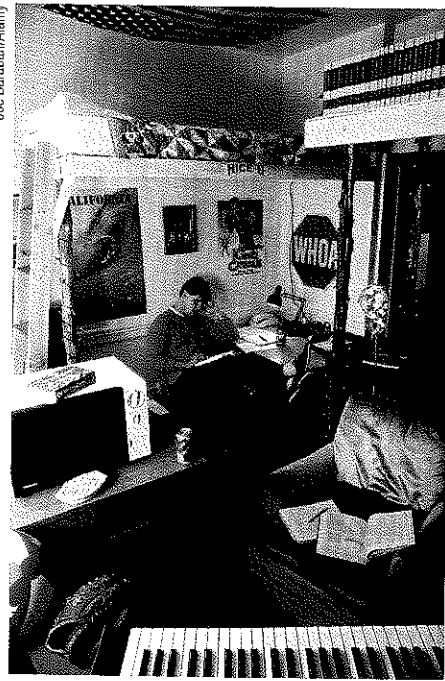
"Mr. Coughlin over there was the founder of one of the first motorcycle gangs."



"I'm going to France—I'm a different person in France."

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© The New Yorker Collection, 2006. Victoria Roberts from cartoonbank.com. All Rights Reserved.



Room with a cue Even at “zero acquaintance,” people can discern something of others’ personality from glimpsing their website, bedroom, or office.

- *personal websites.* Is a personal website or an online profile also a canvas for self-expression? Or is it an opportunity for people to present themselves in false or misleading ways? It’s more the former (Back et al., 2010; Gosling et al., 2007; Marcus et al., 2006). Visitors to personal websites quickly gain important clues to the creator’s extraversion, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Even mere pictures of people, and their associated clothes, expressions, and postures, can give clues to personality (Naumann et al., 2009).
- *electronic communication.* If you have ever felt you could detect others’ personality from their writing voice, you are right!! (What a cool, exciting finding!!!) People’s ratings of others’ personalities based solely on their e-mails or blogs correlate with actual personality scores on measures such as extraversion and neuroticism (Gill et al., 2006; Oberlander & Gill, 2006; Yarkoni, 2010). Extraverts, for example, use more adjectives.

In unfamiliar, formal situations—perhaps as a guest in the home of a person from another culture—our traits remain hidden as we carefully attend to social cues. In familiar, informal situations—just hanging out with friends—we feel less constrained, allowing our traits to emerge (Buss, 1989). In these informal situations, our expressive styles—our animation, manner of speaking, and gestures—are impressively consistent. That’s why those very thin slices of someone’s behavior—even just three 2-second clips of a teacher—can be revealing (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992, 1993).

Some people are naturally expressive (and therefore talented at pantomime and charades); others are less expressive (and therefore better poker players). To evaluate people’s voluntary control over their expressiveness, researchers asked people to *act* as expressive or inhibited as possible while stating opinions (DePaulo et al., 1992). The remarkable findings: Inexpressive people, even when feigning expressiveness, were less expressive than expressive people acting naturally. Similarly, expressive people, even when trying to seem inhibited, were less inhibited than inexpressive people acting naturally. It’s hard to be someone you’re not, or not to be who you are.

To sum up, we can say that at any moment the immediate situation powerfully influences a person’s behavior. Social psychologists have assumed, albeit without much evidence, that this is especially so when a “strong situation” makes clear demands (Cooper & Withey, 2009). We can better predict drivers’ behavior at traffic lights from knowing the color of the lights than from knowing the drivers’ personalities. Thus, professors may perceive certain students as subdued (based on their classroom behavior), but friends may perceive them as pretty wild (based on their party behavior). Averaging our behavior across many occasions does, however, reveal distinct personality traits. Traits exist. We differ. And our differences matter.

Before You Move On

► ASK YOURSELF

Where would you place yourself on the five personality dimensions—conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism (emotional stability versus instability), openness, and extraversion? Where might your family and friends place you?

► TEST YOURSELF

What is the person-situation controversy?

Answers to the Test Yourself questions can be found in Appendix E at the end of the book.

Module 58 Review

58-1 How do psychologists use traits to describe personality?

- *Trait* theorists see personality as a stable and enduring pattern of behavior. They describe our differences rather than trying to explain them.
- Using factor analysis, they identify clusters of behavior tendencies that occur together. Genetic predispositions influence many traits.

58-2 What are personality inventories, and what are their strengths and weaknesses as trait-assessment tools?

- *Personality inventories* (such as the *MMPI*) are questionnaires on which people respond to items designed to gauge a wide range of feelings and behaviors.
- Test items are *empirically derived*, and the tests are objectively scored. But people can fake their answers to create a good impression, and the ease of computerized testing may lead to misuse of the tests.

58-3 Which traits seem to provide the most useful information about personality variation?

- The Big Five personality factors—conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, openness, and extraversion (CANOE)—currently offer the clearest picture of personality. These factors are stable and appear to be found in all cultures.

58-4 Does research support the consistency of personality traits over time and across situations?

- A person’s average traits persist over time and are predictable over many different situations. But traits cannot predict behavior in any one particular situation.

Multiple-Choice Questions

- Which of the following is the best term or phrase for a characteristic pattern of behavior or a disposition to feel and act?
 - Myers-Briggs Indicator
 - Factor analysis
 - Introversion
 - Extroversion
 - Trait
- Which of the following is a “Big Five” personality factor?
 - Seriousness
 - Neuroticism
 - Dutifulness
 - Dominance
 - Abstractedness
- Which of the following is best described along a continuum ranging from ruthless and suspicious to helpful and trusting?
 - Conscientiousness
 - Agreeableness
 - Openness
 - Extraversion
 - Perfectionism
- Which of the following is true based on “Big Five” personality traits research?
 - Highly conscientious people are likely to be evening people or “owls.”
 - Highly conscientious people get poor grades.
 - Married partners scoring the same on agreeableness are more likely to experience marital dissatisfaction.
 - Shy introverts are more likely to prefer communicating through e-mail instead of in person.
 - Neuroticism predicts the use of positive-emotion words in text messages.