

# Trait Theory

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson will identify key aspects of the trait theory of personality. You will also consider how your self and social awareness skill relates to your traits. Our discussion breaks down as follows:

## 1. Personality Traits

The theory of personality focuses on personality traits, but what exactly is a personality trait?

**Personality traits** are the basic, stable, and consistent qualities that people show over time and in different kinds of situations. These are the building blocks of a person's self. Essentially, they are the qualities we put together to describe who a person is and what they're like. Personality traits can have an influence on our behaviors.

➞ **EXAMPLE** For instance, if somebody is an angry or irritable person, they may be more prone to act out of anger or violence.

A **trait theorist** is a personality psychologist that conducts a scientific study of personality to identify and measure these particular aspects of a person's personality. This area of study is considered reductive as a theory, like structuralism, because it tries to break it down into the smallest possible parts.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Personality Trait

The basic and stable and consistent qualities people show over time and in different situations; the building blocks of a person's self, or sense of who they are

#### Trait Theorist

A personality psychologist that attempts to identify and measure particular aspects or pieces of a person's personality (or traits)

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## 2. Contributions of Allport

One of the founding figures in trait theory of personality is Gordon Allport. Allport studied and lived during the first half of the 1900s. His major contribution to personality trait theory was the identification of different levels and categories of traits.

He developed the idea of general versus specific traits in personality.

Type	Description	Example
<b>Common Traits</b>	Also considered a general trait. Common traits are traits that are recognized and shared by most people within a certain culture.	In the United States, competitiveness is a trait that is shared and valued by people. However, collective or more group-oriented cultures in Africa or Asia might not value the trait of competitiveness as highly.
<b>Individual Traits</b>	Specific traits are individual traits that a person has; these are unique and specific to each person over time. Individual traits are the focus of our trait theories.  Within individual traits, Allport further identified levels of importance for those traits. He developed what is called <b>Allport's "Lexical Hypothesis"</b> and identified 18,000 words representing traits in the dictionary. He organized these into levels of traits.	A person from the U.S. may be a shy and less outgoing person while still sharing the general trait of competitiveness with someone from another region.
<b>Cardinal Traits</b>	People might consider certain traits as being more important or more influential to their own ideas and behavior. A cardinal trait is the most influential and important trait that can be in a person, and this trait is essentially behind every kind of action that the person takes. Cardinal traits are very rare, since people are generally not defined by a single trait.	Mother Teresa has a cardinal trait of kindness, because this trait essentially guided all of her actions during her life.
<b>Central Traits</b>	This type of trait is probably the most important to the trait theory. Central traits are the prominent, influential traits that are at the core of the personality. They don't completely define a person, but do influence the way that people usually act.	A person might be humorous, intelligent, or shy.
<b>Secondary Traits</b>	This type of trait is considerably less influential. These can be things like preferences in what you like about food or colors. It could also be certain kinds of traits that are only shown in certain situations or circumstances.	A person might only be shy or anxious when speaking in public, but otherwise might be an outgoing person.



### Self and Social Awareness: Skill Reflect

What are some of your central and secondary traits? Reflect on yourself to grow in your self and social awareness.

**Common Traits**

Traits shared by most members of a specific culture

**Individual Traits**

Specific person's unique personality traits

**Allport's "Lexical Hypothesis"**

Gordon Allport identified 18,000 words representing traits in the dictionary and organized these into levels of traits

**Cardinal Traits**

Traits that are so basic that all of a person's activities can be traced back to the trait

**Central Traits**

Core qualities of a personality; major characteristics you would use to describe an individual

**Secondary Traits**

Preferences that are dependent on the environment

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## 3. The Five Factor Model

The **Five Factor Model (or Big Five Theory)** is one model in trait theory of personality. Personality is the basic, stable, and consistent quality that people show over time and in different kinds of situations. Personality traits are the building blocks of a person's sense of self, or who they are.

Gordon Allport was one of the first major figures in trait theory, and he identified a list of over 4,500 different traits. However, it proved difficult to identify and keep track of this many traits. Another psychologist named Raymond Cattell removed some of those uncommon traits from Allport's list and combined related ones. He, in the end, identified 16 factors. This led to the creation of the 16 personality factor questionnaire, or the 16 PF, which is a very commonly used personality test.

The most widely accepted of the trait theories, especially today, is the Big Five. This theory was first developed by Paul Costa and Robert McCrae in 1992, and has been developed by other personality theorists over time. The purpose of this theory is to try to identify the basic important dimensions of personality. This is done by putting certain areas of personality within a scale from low to high.

Where a person falls on this scale in the five areas would indicate what type of traits they display. There is not necessarily a good side or a bad side to the Big Five scales, but it is important to know that there are definitely some aspects that are a bit more favorable than others. The five main areas are:

- Openness to experience
- Conscientiousness
- Extroversion
- Agreeableness
- Neuroticism



You can remember these different areas using an acronym like O.C.E.A.N. or C.A.N.O.E.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Five Factor Model of Personality (or Big Five Theory)

Based on collection of researchers data on hundreds of personality descriptions. Most can be grouped into five main categories.

## 1a. Openness to Experience

**Openness to experience** refers to how intellectually curious a person might be, or how appreciative they are of art, emotions, or fantasies. In addition, it refers to how adventurous a person might be, and how outgoing they are in terms of new experiences.

On the low side of openness, a person might be very down to earth, very routine, or very conventional. Someone very high in openness to experience, such as thrill seekers, might be very creative, imaginative, or prefer new experiences.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Openness to Experience

Imaginative, likes variety, and independent

## 1b. Conscientiousness

**Conscientiousness** refers to how organized, disciplined, or methodical someone might be. This scale also looks at how responsible someone is and how driven they are to succeed.

On the low side of conscientiousness, people are very disorganized, careless, easygoing, or relaxed. On the high end are people that are very efficient, well organized, and hard working. A perfectionist is someone high in conscientiousness.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Conscientiousness

Organized, careful, and disciplined

## 1c. Extroversion

**Extroversion** refers to how socially outgoing a person might be, as well as how expressive and talkative a person is. On the low end of extroversion, a person might be very quiet, reserved, or passive. They may tend to sit back and to not express themselves very much.

Someone high in extroversion is very outgoing, very talkative, energetic, and affectionate. This person would be the social butterfly or the “life of the party.” It is important to note, however, that simply because someone is high in extroversion, it does not mean they are high in openness to experience as well.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Extroversion

Sociable, fun-loving, and affectionate

## 1d. Agreeableness

**Agreeableness** refers to how friendly, accepting, kind, and caring a person might be. This measures how positive someone is towards other people.

On the low end is somebody who's very cold, withdrawn, suspicious, critical, or antagonistic towards other people. They are not just necessarily withdrawing from others, but are actively opposing them.

Someone high in agreeableness is very trusting and compassionate, and tends to be very cooperative. A person who tries to sacrifice themselves for good causes, for instance, would be high in agreeableness.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Agreeableness

Softhearted, trusting, and helpful

### 1e. Neuroticism/Emotional Stability

**Neuroticism/emotional stability** refers to how emotionally stable a person is and how likely a person is to experience negative or unpleasant emotions.

On the low end, a person who is low in neuroticism is very calm, secure, confident, and even-tempered. They generally stay the same in terms of emotions.

Somebody high in neuroticism is very sensitive to comments or to emotions. They are very self-conscious, temperamental, nervous, and irritable. For instance, someone who is neurotic may be nervous and constantly worried about other people's opinions.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Neuroticism/Emotional Stability

Calm, secure, self-satisfied



#### Self and Social Awareness: Skill Reflect

Where do you fall on the traits in the Big Five scale? Reflect on yourself to grow in your self and social awareness.



#### SUMMARY

Today's lesson has focused on the **theory of personality** and personality traits, which are the basic and consistent qualities people exhibit. These are studied by trait theorists trying to break down personality into its basic components. Gordon Allport is one of the founding fathers of trait theory. The **contributions of Allport** include identifying and creating levels for traits. Your self and social awareness skill relates to the traits you possess and exhibit.

**The Five Factor Model** is a model in trait theory of personality. This is the most widely accepted of the trait theories, and was developed by Paul Costa and Robert McCrae. It has five areas of personality on a scale from high to low. **The Five Factors** are: openness to new experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

Good luck!



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Agreeableness**

Softhearted, trusting, and helpful.

### **Allport's "Lexical Hypothesis"**

Gordon Allport identified 18,000 words representing traits in the dictionary and organized these into levels of traits.

### **Cardinal Traits**

Traits that are so basic that all of a person's activities can be traced back to the trait.

### **Central Traits**

Core qualities of a personality; major characteristics you would use to describe an individual.

### **Common Traits**

Traits shared by most members of a specific culture.

### **Conscientiousness**

Organized, careful, and disciplined.

### **Extroversion**

Sociable, fun-loving, and affectionate.

### **Five Factor Model of Personality (or Big Five Theory).**

Based on collection of researchers data on hundreds of personality descriptions. Most can be grouped into five main categories.

### **Individual Traits**

A specific person's unique personality traits.

### **Neuroticism/Emotional Stability**

Calm, secure, self-satisfied.

### **Openness to Experience**

Imaginative, likes variety, and independent.

### **Personality Trait**

The basic and stable and consistent qualities people show over time and in different situations; the building blocks of a person's self, or sense of who they are.

### **Secondary Traits**

Preferences that are dependent on the environment.

### **Trait Theorist**

A personality psychologist that attempts to identify and measure particular aspects or pieces of a person's personality (or traits).

