

2

Personality, Temperament, and Mood

DEFINITIONS

Without any doubt, personality is the most individual characteristic of a human being. “Personality is the part of the field of psychology that most considers people in their entirety as individuals and as complex beings.”

Personality generally refers to the complex of all the attributes that characterize a unique individual. According to Pervin and John’s (2001) standard definition, personality represents those characteristics of the person that “account for consistent patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving” (p. 4). Such a broad view obviously allows for a wide range of approaches but the emphasis in all of these approaches has been on ‘consistent patterns.’ Personal experience suggests that there is a certain constancy about the way in which an individual behaves, regardless of the actual situation. Indeed, every language contains a wide array of adjectives to describe these patterns, ranging from *aggressive* to *kind* or from *lazy* to *sociable*, and there seems to be a fair deal of agreement among people about such categorizations—this suggests that these adjectives represent underlying personality traits. Personality theories, then, attempt to identify these traits and organize them into broad personality dimensions.

As a first step, it is useful to distinguish ‘temperament’ and ‘mood’ from ‘personality.’ Although there are no unequivocal definitions, *temperament* is typically used to refer to individual differences that are heavily rooted in the biological substrate of behavior and that are highly heritable (Snow et al., 1996), the kind of characteristics whose traces we can already detect in early childhood. Thus, temperament and personality are seen as broadly overlapping domains, with temperament providing the primarily biological basis for the developing personality (Hogan, Harkness, & Lubinski, 2000).

In contrast to the very stable and enduring construct of ‘temperament,’ a ‘mood’ refers to a highly volatile, changing state that is still not completely random. Instead, it represents “familiar surges of emotions” (Cooper, 2002, p. 262) that we experience often (although not necessarily) in response to

life events. Therefore, moods are ‘states’ rather than ‘traits.’ States are highly volatile, frequently changing features and traits, on the other hand, are stable and constant properties.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF PERSONALITY

The ‘Big Five’ Model

There are five main components of the Big Five construct (the initials of which enable the acronym OCEAN). All the five dimensions are rather broad, comprising several important facets, which are usually referred to as *primary traits*. Because the model originated in adjectives, an effective way of describing the main dimensions is listing some key adjectives they are associated with at the high and the low end.

- *Openness to experience*: High scorers are imaginative, curious, flexible, creative, moved by art, novelty seeking, original, and untraditional; low scorers are conservative, conventional, down-to-earth, unartistic, and practical.
- *Conscientiousness*: High scorers are systematic, meticulous, efficient, organized, reliable, responsible, hard-working, persevering, and self-disciplined; low scorers are unreliable, aimless, careless, disorganized, late, lazy, negligent, and weak-willed.
- *Extraversion–introversion*: High scorers are sociable, gregarious, active, assertive, passionate, and talkative; low scorers are passive, quiet, reserved, withdrawn, sober, aloof, and restrained.
- *Agreeableness*: High scorers are friendly, good-natured, likeable, kind, forgiving, trusting, cooperative, modest, and generous; low scorers are cold, cynical, rude, unpleasant, critical, antagonistic, suspicious, vengeful, irritable, and uncooperative.
- *Neuroticism–Emotional stability*: High scorers are worrying, anxious, insecure, depressed, self-conscious, moody, emotional, and unstable; low scorers are calm, relaxed, unemotional, hardy, comfortable, content, even tempered, and self-satisfied.

These adjectives have been selected because they are the most commonly cited ones in the various descriptions of the Big Five model. When we look at the list it becomes evident that some of the scales are rather ‘skewed’ (biased) in terms of their content, with one end of the scale being clearly more positive than the other (in the Conscientiousness and Agreeableness scales, for example, nobody would want to score low).

Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)

The use of the term *indicator* in the title of the MBTI, instead of the more common ‘test’ or ‘inventory,’ is not a mere stylistic issue. It is related to the fact that the dimensions of the MBTI do not refer to traditional scales ranging from positive to negative (e.g., like those in the ‘Big Five’ model). Rather, they indicate various aspects of one’s psychological set-up and, depending on their combinations, every type can have positive or negative effects in a specific life domain. This value-neutral approach is very similar to what we find with learning styles, where scholars also emphasize that the various style dimensions carry no value judgment and that an individual can be successful in every style position, only in a different way. In fact, partly because of this similarity, the MBTI has often been used in L2 studies as a *learning style* measure. This is justifiable inasmuch as, as Ehrman (1996) explains, the MBTI personality dimensions have cognitive style correlates; for this reason Ehrman calls these factors ‘personality styles.’ We should note, however, that within the domain of psychology the MBTI is considered a personality type inventory.

The four dichotomies targeted by the MBTI are as follows (for more details, see Leaver et al., in press):

- *Extraversion–Introversion*, referring to where people prefer to focus their attention and get their energy from: the *outer world* of people and activity or their *inner world* of ideas and experiences. This facet is also part of the Big Five model and has already been described there (see also chapt. 5, for further details).
- *Sensing–Intuition*, referring to how people perceive the world and gather information. ‘Sensing’ concerns what is real and actual as experienced through one or more of the five senses; a sensing person therefore is empirically inclined and tends to be interested in the observable physical world with all its rich details (Ehrman, 1996). In contrast, a person on the ‘intuitive’ end of the continuum does not rely on the process of sensing and is less interested in the factual details; instead, he/she relies on the process of intuition, preferring the abstract and imaginative to the concrete, and tends to focus on the patterns and meanings in the data.
- *Thinking–Feeling*, referring to how people prefer to arrive at conclusions and make decisions. ‘Thinking’ types follow rational principles while trying to reduce the impact of any subjective, emotional factors; they make decisions impersonally on the basis of logical consequences. ‘Feeling’ types, on the other hand, are guided by concern for others and for social values; they strive for harmony and show compassion; they

are slow to voice criticism even if it is due but are quick to show appreciation; thus, they ‘think with their hearts’ (Ehrman, 1996).

- *Judging–Perceiving*, referring to how people prefer to deal with the outer world and take action. Judging types favor a planned and orderly way, seeking closure and finality, whereas people on the perceiving end of the scale like flexibility and spontaneity and therefore like to keep their options open. They often resist efforts of others to impose order on their lives (Ehrman, 1996).

The MBTI requires people to make forced choices and decide on one pole of each of the four preferences. The permutation of the preferences yields sixteen possible combinations called “types”, usually marked by the four initial letters of the preferences (because two components start with an ‘I,’ ‘intuition’ is marked with the letter ‘N’); for example, Myers’ own type preference was Introversi–Intuition–Feeling–Perceiving (INFP). This is the level where the instrument and the underlying personality type theory come into its own: The 16 MBTI types have been found to be remarkably valid because, as Ehrman (1996) explained, the combinations are more than the sum of the parts: They outline real, recognizable character types and thus the inventory has proved to be useful in a wide variety of contexts, from counseling to making personnel decisions in industry. Leaver et al. (in press) argue that none of these sixteen possible types can be considered better per se than any of the others although they add that there are likely to be environments that provide a better fit for some types than for others.

PERSONALITY AND LEARNING

Whereas no one would doubt that personality variables and types are important factors in determining our behavior in general, from an educational perspective the real question is to what extent these dispositions affect learning.

Several studies have attempted to identify the personality correlates of academic achievement. Although the emerging overall picture is rather mixed, if not bleak, some patterns did seem to emerge over the years. Within the Big Five paradigm, if we look at the component structure it is clear that the two dimensions that are intuitively most closely related to learning are Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness. There is some evidence for these positive associations, and especially Conscientiousness has produced consistent results, both in school and college contexts. Extraversion, on the other hand, has been found to have a negative relationship with academic success due to the introverts’ greater ability to consolidate learning, lower distractibility, and better study habits. Similarly, Neuroticism has also displayed a negative relation with learning achievement due to the anxiety factor that it subsumes. However, even in the

studies that do report a significant association between personality and learning measures, this relationship rarely explains more than about 15% of the variance in academic performance.

Furthermore, the moderate but significant results reported in the literature can be counterbalanced by many studies which failed to obtain any significant correlations between personality and learning measures. And even when meaningful personality–achievement correlations were found in one setting, they often could not be replicated in another. Because of this less-than-straightforward picture it is to some extent up to the various scholars' own beliefs how they interpret the big picture. To me it seems that Aiken's (1999) general conclusion about personality–behavior relations is fairly accurate: "Despite the large number of hypotheses concerning personality that have been generated over the years, on one test of their validity—the ability to make accurate behavioral predictions—they have not fared very well" (p. 169). So what is the reason for these at best inconclusive, and certainly counter-intuitive, results? At least four main points can be mentioned:

(1) *Interaction with situation-specific variables.* There is some evidence that personality factors interact with various variables inherent to the social context of the learning situation, which prevents generalized linear associations (such as correlations) from reaching overall significance. Skehan (1989), for example, reported on a study by Wankowski that related extraversion–introversion to age, and found that this personality trait affected achievement differently before and after puberty in the investigated sample: Below puberty extraverts had an advantage over introverts and after puberty it was the other way round. Wankowski explained the shift with the different learning environments students were exposed to, as a result of which the nature of the 'achieving personality' changed. This makes sense: it is not difficult to think of certain types of learning situations in which an outgoing and sociable person would excel and some other contexts which would favor his/her more quiet and sober counterparts. Perhaps it is for this reason that Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, and Todesco's (1978) study on the good language learner listed both extraversion and introversion as a positive attribute. In the same vein, Matthews et al. (2000) argued that the nature of the actual tasks students engage in imposes a personality bias. For example, extraverts tend to perform well under conditions of high stimulation or arousal, which means that some difficult tasks might provide the optimum level of arousal for them, whereas introverts in the same task might be overaroused, which impairs their performance.

Farsides and Woodfield (2003) also believed that the personality–learning relation is to a great extent the function of contextual features. In their view, students relatively high on Openness to Experience should thrive in educational settings that promote and rewarding critical and original thought, but not in settings that emphasize the acquisition of received wisdom. Their study also produced an unexpected result, namely the Agreeableness correlated significantly with long-term academic

achievement as expressed by course grades. A closer analysis revealed that this influence was entirely mediated by situational factors: The particular course which the study focused on had a strong seminar component and it was found that Agreeable students went to seminars more often than did less Agreeable students; this more intensive participation in this course element, in turn, was rewarded by improved final course grades. The authors therefore concluded that students relatively high on Agreeableness should thrive when instruction and assessment occur within social interaction, while those lower in Agreeableness should fare better in educational settings where students are less socially interdependent (or are even negatively interdependent).

(2) *Need for less simplistic models.* Although it is clear from the above that the relationship between personality factors and learning achievement is often not direct and linear but rather indirect, mediated by various modifying variables, the typical research design reported in the literature is still correlational, testing for simple personality trait–learning outcome relationships. Aiken (1999) points out that this way we are unlikely to achieve more accurate behavioral predictions because

For the most part, what we have in psychology, and in the psychology of personality in particular, is a collection of interrelated assertions concerning human behavior, cognitions, and feelings, but far less than a systematic structure from which unerring predictions and explanations can be made. (p. 169)

Investigating second language learning, MacIntyre and Charos's (1996) results provided support for the need for more complex theoretical constructs: The researchers found that global personality traits were implicated in the learning process primarily via their influence on language-related attitudes, anxiety, perceived competence, and motivation, rather than through their direct impact on learning outcomes. In fact, Lalonde and Gardner (1984) also found that although personality traits did not appear to correlate with language measures, "there were many meaningful relations with measures of attitudes and motivation" (p. 230). An example of a more complex model that includes a featured personality component in the L2 field is the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) construct by MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998), in which personality forms an important part of the basic layer of the construct, with four further layers of variables conceptualized between personality traits and communicative behavior.

(3) *Supertraits or primary traits.* As we have seen above, the Big Five construct consists of five main dimensions, or 'supertraits,' and 30 facets, or 'primary traits.' Although the rationale for clustering the primary traits into supertraits was that the facets in one dimension were interrelated, when it comes to their relationship with academic success we find differences among the interrelated primary traits in terms of their impact on learning.

This difference obviously reduces the supertraits' predictive capacity, but the alternative, that is, to examine the personality–learning relation at the primary trait level, would in effect mean giving up the Big Five construct with all its merits. Yet, in the light of the limited success in using the Big Five dimensions for explaining academic success, Chamorro-Premuzic and Furnham (2003b) proposed to examine the primary traits because people with identical superfactor scores may have very different primary trait factor scores. In their study, they did indeed find that several primary traits associated with the supertraits Neuroticism, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness were differentially correlated with academic performance. Matthews et al. (2000) also highlighted the fact that some of the strongest links between personality and performance had been obtained at the primary trait level (notably between anxiety and performance).

(4) *Methodological issues.* The inconclusive results in the literature are also partly due to various methodological limitations or inconsistencies. Different studies, for example, have used different criteria for academic success, ranging from exam marks, grade point average, and final degree results to situated course-specific evaluations such as course grades. In addition, as Farsides and Woodfield (2003) pointed out, different studies have permitted considerably different time lapses between the collection of predictor and criterion data, with a range of a few weeks to several years. A further potential source of insignificant results is that many of the studies employed convenience samples (the most typical being psychology majors at the university of the researchers) and in such pre-selected samples the variance in ID variables can be so restricted that it may in some (but not all) cases prevent correlation-based coefficients from reaching statistical significance. We must recognize at this stage that these methodological problems are just as relevant in the field of L2 studies.

In conclusion, most specialists in the field would agree that past research has not done justice to the assumed relation between personality variables and learning outcomes: As mentioned earlier, even carefully executed studies rarely manage to explain more than about 15% of the variance in academic success. This relatively low percentage, however, may not be so surprising if we consider the following: Personality traits can in many ways be compared to the ingredients of a cooking recipe and it is a known fact that a good cook can usually prepare a delicious meal of almost any ingredients by knowing how to combine them. In a similar vein, one can argue that we should not expect many strong linear relationships (expressed, e.g., by correlations) between individual personality traits and achievement, because successful learners can combine their personality features to best effect by utilizing their specific strengths and compensating for their possible weaknesses (Brown, 2000). Thus, my personal feeling is that the conclusion often found in the literature that personality is not sufficiently related to academic achievement to be of real significance in educational settings is misleading: Ability and motivation—the two ID variables that have been found to be re-

sponsible for most of the variance in students' academic performance—simply do not explain the whole picture, since personality factors act as powerful modifying variables. I believe that future research with more elaborate theoretical constructs and research designs is likely to document personality effects better.