Learning objectives

• To develop a working understanding of the concept of 'personality trait' and the hierarchical structure of traits.
• To understand how psychologists have developed models of the dimensional structure of personality traits, including the statistical methods employed.
• To comprehend the 'Big Five' personality dimensions and their differences from existing three-factor models.
• To recognize the importance of trait taxonomies for advancing psychological understanding and prediction.
• To have a working knowledge of specific traits in addition to the broad personality dimensions.

This chapter turns to the fundamental question of how individual differences in personality should be described. The concept of personality 'trait' - the primary unit of personality description - is introduced and defined, and the hierarchical nature of traits is explained. The long-standing efforts to uncover the structure or organization of personality traits, by reducing the bewildering variety of possible traits into a few basic personality dimensions, are then explored. Along the way, the statistical methods used to conduct this reduction
are presented. One prominent outcome of this work, the five-factor model of
personality, is presented, and contrasted with a rival model that proposes
three rather than five basic dimensions along which people vary. We discuss
the value of dimensional systems such as these, and demonstrate the many
phenomena that one illustrative dimension helps to illuminate. Finally, we
see that, in addition to such broad personality dimensions, a variety of more
specific traits also offer valuable ways of capturing meaningful differences
between people.

The previous chapter left us with an abstract understanding of what personal-
ity psychologists study. Our rather unwieldy definition tells us what personal-
ity is, according to the psychologists who study it. However, it does not even
begin to tell us how to characterize a personality. How are we to describe the
individual differences that make up people’s personalities?

Description is a fundamental problem for any science, and personality psy-
chology aspires to be scientific. Chemistry has its periodic table of elements,
zoology its taxonomy of biological species, physics its classification of elemen-
tary particles. These systems of description systematically lay out the sorts of
things that scientists encounter and work with when explaining phenomena.
They describe the structure or organization of the world from the perspective of
the respective sciences, and provide the units of analysis for theoretical and
empirical work. So how are we to describe the structure of personality, and
what are the proper units of description?

WHAT IS A TRAIT?

Many psychologists think that the best unit for describing personalities is the
trait, and that the structure of personality is the organization of traits. At one
level, the concept of trait is a simple one: a trait is a characteristic form of behav-
ioring, thinking, or feeling, such as ‘friendliness’, ‘rigidity’, or ‘anxiousness’. At
another level the situation is more complicated, and several important aspects
of the concept need to be spelled out. Some of these should remind you of our
discussion of the concept of personality in Chapter 1:

- A trait must be a relatively enduring characteristic of the person, as distinct from
  a transient state. Although vague, the ‘relatively’ is an important qualification
  here. Traits may change over time, but they shouldn’t change rapidly or chaoti-
cally; they should tend to be stable attributes of the person.
- A trait represents a pattern of behaviour, thinking, or feeling that is relatively con-
sistent over a variety of different situations. If a person behaves in a very different
manner when in similar situations – being very outgoing in some and very reserved
and shy in others, for example – we should not attribute a trait to him or her. Once
again, the 'relatively' is important because traits do not entail total situational
consistency in a person's behavior. People need not be shy in all social situations
for it to be appropriate to call them shy.

- A trait is a way in which people differ from one another - it is, as scientists would
say, a 'variable' - so that different individuals will manifest different levels of the
trait. To simplify communication, we may say that someone either has or doesn't
have a particular trait, but psychologists typically assume that people differ by
degrees on traits. People may have greater or lesser degrees of shyness, and in
principle these degrees can be quantified.

- Traits are dispositions. That is, a trait is best thought of as a probabilistic tendency
that a person has to act in a certain way when placed in a certain kind of situation.
Cats, for instance, have dispositions to hiss and scratch, but will only express these
dispositions in particular circumstances, and even in these circumstances they may
not always do so. Consequently, a trait may remain unexpressed and unobserved if
a person encounters few situations in which it might be expressed.

- Traits vary in their generality. Some traits only bear on narrow domains of life, and
others are relevant to a very large proportion of the person's everyday activities.
We can talk about a hierarchy of traits, with relatively specific traits that relate to
a small number of behaviours falling under broader traits. For instance, shame-
proneness could be considered one component of a more general trait of 'negative
emotionality', the disposition to experience unpleasant emotional states. Such a
hierarchy could have several levels, with particular behaviours or habits repre-
senting the bottom level: placing a raunchy personals advertisement is a behaviour
that may reflect a narrow trait of sexual sensation-seeking, which is one compo-
nent of a medium-level trait of sensation-seeking, which is itself a component of a
high-level trait of extraversion. This hierarchical arrangement is illustrated in
Figure 2.1.

**DEFINING THE TRAIT UNIVERSE: PART 1**

Our discussion so far should make it clearer how personality psychologists con-
ceptualize traits. Defining what a trait is and choosing the trait as the unit of per-
sonality description is only the beginning, of course. To go further towards a
system of personality description, we need a way to map the trait universe. In
other words, we need to find a way to characterize the range of personality vari-
ation that traits cover. Does this universe of traits have any fundamental dimen-
sions, groupings, coordinates, or axes, and what might they be?

A first step towards answering this question by English-speaking psycholo-
gists was taken by Allport and Odbert in 1936, who followed research in
German by Baumgarten. Allport and Odbert sought to define the boundaries of
the trait universe by collecting an exhaustive list of personality descriptors (see
John, 1990, for more details). They did this by patiently combing through a large dictionary, containing about 550,000 entries, for terms that referred to ways in which one person’s behaviour could be distinguished from another’s. By this means they obtained almost 18,000 terms, an astonishing number if you think of it. As you might imagine, after reading Chapter 1, not all of these terms were personality characteristics. In fact, about three-quarters of them were not, according to the authors’ understanding of personality. Some referred to physical characteristics, cognitive abilities or talents, transient states such as moods, specific behaviours, social roles, or highly evaluative terms used to describe people’s effects on others rather than consistencies in their own behaviour (e.g., ‘irritating’). Nevertheless, after all of these non-personality terms were removed from the list, roughly 4,500 trait terms remained.

Allport and Odbert’s work creates a dilemma. If there really are 4,500 different trait terms circulating in English, and similar numbers in other languages, does this mean personality psychologists have to pay attention to all of them? That would seem to be a daunting task, and any descriptive system that needs
4,500 different terms would seem to fail an important scientific criterion: to be an economical and practical way to describe the phenomena of interest, in this case human personalities. Surely, also, many trait terms are redundant with others and refer to the same sorts of people. It is possible to draw subtle conceptual distinctions between ‘hostile’, ‘aggressive’, ‘fierce’, and ‘belligerent’, for example, but their meanings clearly overlap and it would be more than a little odd to hear someone described as ‘hostile and aggressive but not at all fierce or belligerent’. If this is the case, it makes sense to imagine that hidden within the vast expanse of the trait term universe there might be a smaller number of fundamental personality characteristics, like constellations in the night sky. But how many such basic traits are there, what might they be, and how on earth might we be able to discover them?

**A STATISTICAL DIGRESSION**

Before we answer the first two of these questions we need to address the third, the ‘methodological’ question of how basic traits are to be determined. And to answer this question, we need to embark on a short digression into statistics. If the mere sight of this word makes your stomach turn, be reassured that this little excursion will not be technical. However, like all sciences, personality psychology has a significant quantitative component, and psychologists interested in determining the fundamental traits of personality have relied very heavily on two statistical procedures in particular. Statistical methods are indispensable to personality psychology as it has developed, as it is impossible to grasp efforts to examine personality structure without them.

The first procedure is called the correlation coefficient or correlation for short. A correlation represents the degree of association between two variables (i.e., things that vary) and is measured on a scale from −1 to +1. ‘Association’ refers to the degree to which one variable is related to or predictable on the basis of another. If I know that you are of above average height, for example, I can predict that you will be of above average weight too, because height and weight are associated in this sense. My predictions may be wrong in particular cases – there are plenty of heavy shorter people and skinny tall ones – but on average they should be better than chance (i.e., predicting randomly). This association of height and weight is a positive one, because the higher the quantity of one variable, the higher the quantity of the other is likely to be. A negative association – such as between a place's latitude and its average temperature – means that the higher the quantity of one variable, the lower the quantity of the other tends to be. When there is no association between two variables – such as shoe size and intelligence – they have a correlation of 0 and do not enable any
prediction of one another at all. A very large proportion of research in personality psychology involves looking for associations among variables, using the humble correlation coefficient.

The magnitude of a correlation coefficient matters a great deal. A positive association may exist between two variables, so the correlation is somewhere between 0 and +1, but the implications of it being .1 or .9 are very different. If it is .9, then each variable allows confident prediction of the other: the correlation is almost perfect. If it is .1, on the other hand, the two variables will yield prediction of one another that is barely above chance. By convention in psychology, correlations of .1, .3, and .5 are considered small, moderate, and large, respectively (Cohen, 1992). Correlations much higher than about .6 are quite rare, except between alternative measures of the same variable (e.g., two tests of depression). Because the size of correlations will be referred to on a few occasions throughout this book, it is worth getting some sense of what these values mean. Consider the three hypothetical situations presented in

### Table 2.1 Hypothetical data sets illustrating correlations of different sizes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data set 1: small correlation (.1)</th>
<th>Variable B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Above average</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variable A</td>
<td>Above average</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Below average</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Data set 2: moderate correlation (.3)</th>
<th>Variable B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Above average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variable A</td>
<td>Above average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Below average</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Data set 3: large correlation (.5)</th>
<th>Variable B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Above average</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variable A</td>
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<td>Below average</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Table 2.1 below, each of which represents 200 people measured on two variables, A and B. Each person’s level on each variable is represented as being either ‘above average’ or ‘below average’, in the sense of falling in the top or bottom half of the 200 people. (Strictly speaking, this average is called the ‘median’.) Note that this is a simplification: usually measures of personality variables take a continuous range of numerical values rather than crudely dichotomizing people.

Table 2.1 illustrates small, medium, and large correlations. Look at data set 1 first, which represents a small correlation of .1. If I know that someone is above average on Variable A, I can predict that he or she will also be above average on Variable B, because this is somewhat more likely (55%) than the reverse. However, this prediction is obviously not one that I can be very confident about, as it will be wrong 45% of the time. Still, it is better than nothing, because if I predicted at random I would be wrong 50% of the time.

Data set 2, which illustrates a .3 correlation, is quite a bit better than nothing. Knowing that someone is above average on A allows us to predict that he or she will be above average on B with more assurance. We will be correct 65% of the time, almost twice as often as we are incorrect (i.e., 65 ÷ 35 = 1.86). Data set 3, showing a strong .5 correlation, allows us to be correct 75% of the time: the odds of our prediction being correct are now 3:1. As you can see, the magnitude of a correlation has clear implications.

The little tables we’ve used to illustrate the meaning of correlation are called binomial effect size displays (BESDs; Rosenthal & Rubin, 1982). If you want to get a sense of what a correlation means in practical terms, a simple calculation lets you convert it into this way of thinking. All you need to do is divide the correlation by two and then add 0.5. This number estimates the proportion of cases who are above average on one variable who will be above average on the other; for example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correlation</th>
<th>Divide by 2</th>
<th>Add .5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.4</td>
<td>→ .2</td>
<td>→ .7</td>
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<tr>
<td>-.2</td>
<td>→ -.1</td>
<td>→ .4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.7</td>
<td>→ .35</td>
<td>→ .85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>→ 0</td>
<td>→ .5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In these four examples, then, about 70%, 40%, 85%, and 50% of people, respectively, who score above the average (median) on one variable will be above average on the other.

So much for the correlation coefficient, a simple measure of association that is the first statistical procedure that we need to review before returning to our
exploration of personality structure. The second procedure that has been central to the study of personality structure is called factor analysis. In essence, factor analysis is a method for finding patterns within a group of correlations. It is perhaps best illustrated by a hypothetical example, illustrated below. Table 2.2 presents what is called a ‘correlation matrix’, which lays out correlation coefficients for all pairs of variables in a set. One half of the matrix is empty because the correlation between B and C, for example, is the same as the correlation between C and B, so there is no need to present both. Correlations falling on the diagonal are all +1 because a variable always correlates perfectly with itself.

Looking at Table 2.2 what you probably see is a big mess. Some variables correlate quite strongly, some not much at all, some negatively, and some positively. This is where factor analysis enters the scene. What it attempts to do is find patterns of correlations within the matrix that may not be readily obvious to the observer (i.e., what psychologists sometimes facetiously call ‘eyeball analysis’). The technical and computational details of factor analysis need not concern us here, but in this particular correlation matrix the procedure would find clear evidence of two distinct groups of variables. Variables A, C, and F form one group, and variables B, D and E the other. Table 2.3 simply rearranges Table 2.2 to demonstrate the patterns that factor analysis would uncover.

As you can see, all of the correlations among variables A, C, and F are relatively strong and positive, averaging .5, as are the correlations among variables B, D, and E. However, the correlations of variables from one group with variables from the other, shown in the square at the lower left of the table, are all relatively weak, some positive and some negative, and they average close to 0. This indicates that there is no systematic pattern of association between the two variable groups: they are distinct and unrelated. In the language of factor analysis, these groups define separate factors.

Factor analysis searches through correlation matrices in an effort to locate variable groupings such as these. When it does so, it allows us to make certain inferences. First, we can guess that concealed within – or perhaps ‘beneath’ – the large set of variables, there is a smaller set of more basic ‘latent’ variables. Second, we can guess what these latent variables might be by paying attention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>-.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>.5</td>
<td>-.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>-.1</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>-.1</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>.1</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>-.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to what the variables within each group seem to have in common. If variables X, Y, and Z belong to one factor, that factor’s identity or meaning can be guessed at by thinking about how the three variables are conceptually similar or about what they might jointly reflect.

As you may have guessed by now, factor analysis seems like a perfect way to begin the task, interrupted by this statistical digression, of uncovering and characterizing the fundamental traits that may underlie the wild profusion of trait terms.

### DEFINING THE TRAIT UNIVERSE: PART 2

Sure enough, the first attempts to simplify the trait universe and discover the latent structure of personality relied heavily on factor analysis, and thus on correlation coefficients. The trail-blazer in this effort was Raymond Cattell, who tried to distil a smaller number of basic personality factors from Allport and Odbert’s lengthy list of trait terms. Such a reduction could not easily be done by statistical means alone, so Cattell (1943) began by sorting the terms into semantically similar clusters of synonyms or near-synonyms, according to his personal judgment. He then sorted these clusters into pairs that appeared to be semantic opposites, or antonyms. In this fashion he derived 160 clusters, to which he added a few more from the psychological literature, and selected a representative term from each cluster.

At this point, the trait list drastically reduced from 4,500 to 171, statistical methods played their first, minor role. Cattell had 100 people rate one or two people they knew on the 171 trait terms, and then examined the correlations among the terms to identify a smaller set of 60 clusters. These were further reduced to 35 according to Cattell’s judgment of which clusters were supported by the psychological literature. Only now did he employ factor analysis, again using a group of people’s ratings of others’ personalities. Through a complicated procedure, Cattell derived 12 factors from this analysis, to which
he later added four more factors based on additional studies. At the end of this long and complicated process, then, we are left with 16 personality factors on which Cattell built a theory of personality.

Cattell’s efforts to uncover the fundamental dimensions were Herculean, especially given the computational limitations of his time. Contemporary researchers can perform large factor analyses with a few pecks of a keyboard or clicks of a mouse, but in the mid-20th century analyses of moderately large data sets might take weeks of pencil-and-paper calculation. Cattell’s work lives on in the tradition of factor-analytic research he pioneered, and in a still-popular personality test, the 16PF. Nevertheless, it has been eclipsed in recent personality psychology for three main reasons. First, many researchers have found Cattell’s procedure for distilling his 16 factors to be somewhat arbitrary, relying on several steps that seem to involve too much subjective judgment. They have also had trouble replicating his factors in their own studies. Second, although 16 factors allow a much more economical description of personality than 4,500 trait terms, that number still seems too large for most theorists to juggle. It is certainly hard to keep so many dimensions in mind at once, leading many theorists to hope that a simpler system of description might emerge. Finally, many of Cattell’s factors seemed to correlate, just as the trait terms within each factor correlate with one another. This fact raises the possibility that even more basic dimensions, or ‘superfactors’, might underpin Cattell’s 16 factors. Ideally, perhaps, trait terms could be boiled down to truly independent, uncorrelated factors that are irreducible to any others.

The search for this bedrock of fundamental trait dimensions began with Fiske (1949) and was continued by many psychologists in the ensuing decades. Over time, researchers began to notice that factor analyses of personality ratings frequently converged on just five broad factors. Recognizing this regularity took some time, in part because different investigators chose different labels for their factors. Although factor analysis can tell researchers how many factors seem to be present in a correlation matrix, it is sadly incapable of telling precisely what they mean. Researchers must bestow a name, which they do based on some mixture of intelligent guesswork and theoretical predilections. Nevertheless, the recurrence of similar factors in many studies, using different methodologies and large and diverse samples of personality raters, eventually led some psychologists to dub them the ‘Big Five’. These five factors, it is claimed, represent the five fundamental ways along which people’s personalities vary: the core of your personality can be represented by your position on these five dimensions. The primary label for each factor, alternative factor labels, and some trait terms that illustrate each factor, are presented in Table 2.4. Terms in italics represent the opposing pole of each factor.

**Extraversion** is a term that originated in the personality theory of Carl Jung, who meant by it an orientation to the outside world rather than to private
experience, which he dubbed introversion. In the Big Five its connotations are somewhat different. As the table indicates, Extraversion is best exemplified by traits involving sociability, in particular a preference for large groups. However, it is much broader in scope than sociability, encompassing traits that involve energy and activity levels (hence the alternative title ‘surgency’), sensation-seeking, interpersonal dominance, and a tendency to experience positive emotional states. Introverts tend to have low levels of these same traits.

**Agreeableness**, like Extraversion, primarily has to do with interpersonal qualities. Unlike Extraversion, it involves cooperativeness, altruism, and a generally warm, compliant, and trusting stance towards others. Disagreeable individuals are characterized as cold, callous, selfish, calculating, hostile, and competitive in their motivations.

**Conscientiousness** is a factor whose name has been the focus of some disagreement. However, there is little disagreement about the traits that characterize it, which generally reflect self-control, planfulness, and being organized, efficient, and deliberate in one’s approach to tasks. Unconscientious people tend to be impulsive, disorganized, oriented to the present rather than the future, and careless towards their responsibilities. Conscientiousness is therefore a matter of caring about one’s long-term goals and interests, resisting impulses that threaten to sabotage them, and harnessing one’s efforts to accomplish these goals and interests competently. Different names for the factor draw attention to one or other of these aspects: ‘dependability’ emphasizes self-control and predictability,
'prudence' emphasizes planning and foresight, 'will to achieve' emphasizes the driven pursuit of goals.

**Neuroticism** has to do with people's emotional instability. Although 'neurosis' is an almost obsolete psychiatric term referring to pathological manifestations of anxiety, Neuroticism refers to a considerably wider range of negative emotions, including anger, sadness, shame, and embarrassment. It also does not imply the presence of any mental disorder. In this expanded sense, neurotic people are more prone to experience negative emotions, to be psychologically maladjusted and vulnerable, and to have low self-esteem. In contrast, people who are low in Neuroticism are emotionally stable, calm, and able to cope well with stress.

**Openness to experience** is a somewhat vague term for a factor that has proven to be controversial and difficult to name. Metaphorically, 'openness' implies a willingness to adopt novel and unconventional ways of thinking and behaving, manifest in such traits as creativity, imaginativeness, curiosity, and aesthetic appreciation. They are heavily invested in cultivating new experiences, and have a mild tendency to score relatively high on measures of intelligence. People who fall at the other end of this factor are conventional and narrow in their interests, and conservative and sometimes rigid in their approach to life's challenges and opportunities.

This set of 'Big Five' personality factors, which is sometimes referred to as the **five-factor model**, is probably the dominant model of personality structure in contemporary personality psychology. It is pleasingly economical, but also seems to leave few regions of the trait universe uncovered. Most of the trait terms we use in everyday speech can be related to the high or low end of these five factors, and most of the personality scales or tests that psychologists have developed seem to be measuring one or more of them to varying degrees. Research indicates that the factors can be derived from trait terms from several languages besides English, that they emerge reliably in studies of self-ratings as well as ratings of other people, that they are stable over time, and that they can predict many forms of behaviour. A questionnaire measure of the factors, the NEO PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992), is one of the most widely used personality scales. All told, the discovery of the five factors has been hailed as a major integrating achievement of personality psychology, a structure as objectively real as the five continents.

**ALTERNATIVES TO THE BIG FIVE**

Although it has been widely adopted as a descriptive framework, the Big Five is not universally celebrated by psychologists working in the trait psychology tradition. Several alternative models have been propounded, the most
well-supported of which propose that there are only three fundamental dimensions of personality. However, before we get to the details of these alternatives, we need to turn a critical eye on the origins of the Big Five. You will recall that the five factors emerged from statistical reductions of Allport and Odbert’s list of trait terms. At the time you may not have questioned the merits of this list as a starting point for the exploration of personality structure. However, the idea that a language’s repertoire of trait terms is the best place to search for basic personality dimensions can be challenged.

This idea is a key assumption of what has been called the lexical approach to personality description, from the Latin for ‘word’. The lexical approach assumes that personality can be adequately encompassed by single words in natural language, and that languages encode in trait terms the personality distinctions that matter for their speakers. Every important personality characteristic should therefore be represented in the trait vocabulary, or ‘lexicalized’. Is this so obvious? Might it not be the case that some important personality characteristics have evolved no corresponding term? Perhaps some characteristics, or traits, are not recognized or talked about by members of a language community, or maybe some are communicated about only by phrases or sentences. If this were true, and the trait term repertoire does not comprehensively reflect the trait universe, then factor analyses of trait terms might fail to capture some basic domains of personality, or might misrepresent others.

If the lexical approach is potentially flawed in this way, how else might the basic dimensions of personality be discovered? One approach is to examine people’s responses to personality questionnaires rather than to trait lists. For at least a century psychologists have been developing scales or ‘tests’ to assess personality characteristics, which commonly contain a number of questionnaire items. These items usually take the form of statements to which people respond by endorsing one of a set of alternatives (e.g., yes/no, true/false, \(1 = \text{strongly disagree}\) to \(5 = \text{strongly agree}\)). Items might refer to a person’s behaviours, feelings, attitudes, or beliefs. People’s ratings of themselves or others on such items, or on the scales that are composed by combining multiple items, can be factor analysed, just like trait terms.

Advocates of this questionnaire approach to the study of personality structure argue that questionnaire items have one main advantage over trait terms. Simply put, they propose that items should be able to assess a greater range of personality characteristics. The greater semantic complexity of whole sentences should allow items to assess characteristics that have no corresponding single trait term, if such characteristics exist. This complexity also allows items to assess traits in particular contexts, whereas trait terms are context-free. Compare the task of rating how ‘sociable’ you are, which requires you to make a judgment that is abstracted from particular circumstances, with responding to ‘I like to meet new people when I know I probably won’t see them again’. Arguably statements such
as these come closer to our ways of thinking about ourselves and others than lists of traits. It is therefore possible that people might respond in importantly different ways to questionnaire items and trait terms, and that using items might uncover traits to which lexical approach is blind.

The most famous proponent of this questionnaire-based approach to personality description is Hans Eysenck. Eysenck, who died recently, was a colourful and very influential German-born English psychologist noted for his prolific, wide-ranging, and often controversial writings on such topics as the genetics of intelligence, psychoanalysis, crime, psychotherapy, and astrology. He is best known among psychologists for developing a two-factor model of personality. These factors, Extraversion–Introversion and Neuroticism, are now familiar to you, but they were first recognized and rigorously investigated by Eysenck (1947). On the strength of extensive factor-analytic research, he proposed that Cattell's 16 trait dimensions, many of which were moderately correlated, could be reduced to these two uncorrelated factors. In addition, he theorized that these factors were rooted in variations in the functioning of the nervous system, as we shall see in Chapter 4.

In subsequent work, Eysenck found a need for a third factor, which he labelled ‘Psychoticism’. By his account, the traits that composed this factor included aggressiveness, coldness, egocentricity, antisocial tendencies, creativity, lack of empathy, and tough-mindedness. These traits, according to Eysenck, reflect an underlying dimension stretching from psychological normality to psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia, which are marked by disabling symptoms such as hallucinations and bizarre delusions. Other theorists have disputed this understanding of the factor, proposing that it is more closely linked to ‘psychopathic’ tendencies – such as callousness, violence, and ruthlessness towards others – than to psychosis. Although some evidence supports Eysenck’s proposed link between Psychoticism and schizophrenia, the factor’s nature remains rather obscure. Its status is made more controversial by the factor’s somewhat unreliable emergence in factor-analytic studies.

Despite the questions that surround Psychoticism, other psychologists have developed three-factor models of personality that closely resemble Eysenck’s triad. Tellegen (1985), for example, found evidence for factors that he dubbed Positive Emotionality, Negative Emotionality, and Constraint. The first two are closely associated with Extraversion and Neuroticism, respectively, and emphasize the emotional susceptibilities associated with each. Constraint has a strong negative association with Psychoticism, representing a tendency to inhibit and control the expression of impulses and antisocial behaviour. Traits that illustrate Constraint include carefulness, cautiousness, reflectiveness, and lack of spontaneity. Watson and Clark (1993) developed a very similar model – cheekily dubbed the ‘Big Three’ – labelling their three factors Positive Temperament, Negative Temperament, and Disinhibition. Disinhibition's
opposing pole, in this model, is Constraint. Although this profusion of factor names may seem confusing at first, they clearly converge on three distinct conceptual domains, and questionnaire measures of the corresponding factors all correlate strongly.

THREE FACTORS OR FIVE?

There is considerable empirical support for three-factor as well as five-factor models of personality, and proponents of each often find themselves in opposition. You might well ask, though, whether the differences between these models are really so deep. After all, three-factor and five-factor models both recognize that Extraversion and Neuroticism are fundamental dimensions of personality. Their real disagreement is therefore confined to a choice between a single Psychoticism, Disinhibition, or Constraint factor on the one hand, and distinct Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience factors, on the other. It turns out that Constraint or Psychoticism, from the three-factor models, seem to correspond to a combination of the five-factor model’s Agreeableness and Conscientiousness factors. People who score high on Constraint, for example, are typically agreeable and conscientious, and those who score high on Psychoticism are disagreeable and unconscientious. In short, Constraint or Psychoticism can be seen as a broad trait dimension that encompasses two five-factor model factors. Indeed, measures of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness tend to correlate positively with one another (e.g., about .3; see John & Srivastava, 1999). This suggests that the two five-factor dimensions have the sort of affinity that makes it not entirely unreasonable to combine them into a superordinate dimension, although it is also true that they usually emerge as distinct factors in factor-analytic research.

The three-factor and five-factor models of personality are therefore not as different as they might first appear. They share two factors, and the three-factor model’s third factor can be interpreted as a combination of two five-factor model factors. (Alternatively, these two factors can be seen as aspects, facets or components of this third factor.) Three-factor model advocates prefer the combined factor, which yields a more economical system of personality description and reduces the correlations among the system’s factors. Five-factor model advocates, in contrast, prefer to keep Agreeableness and Conscientiousness conceptually distinct, even if they are empirically related. This distinction between ‘lumpers’ and ‘splitters’ – theorists who prefer fewer or more categories, respectively, when making classifications – appears frequently in personality and abnormal psychology. Here, as elsewhere, neither lumpers nor splitters have a monopoly on the truth, and judging who is right cannot be based exclusively on timeless ‘facts’.
Only Openness to Experience is left out of the integration that we have laid out. It has no obvious home in the three-factor model, although its creativity component falls within Eysenck's understanding of Psychoticism. If you consider Openness to be an indispensable component of any system for describing personality you will tend to favour the five-factor model. If, on the other hand, you find it to be of relatively minor importance to personality description, you will consider its exclusion from three-factor models to be a reasonable omission. Whichever stance you take, however, what is not in doubt is that Openness to Experience is a meaningful broad personality factor. Only its importance is in question.

At this point you might be tempted to think that all of this quibbling about how many personality dimensions there are and how they should be characterized demonstrates either the irresolvable nature of the problem or the arbitrariness of psychologists’ answers. Before you give in to this temptation, consider a couple of things. First, the five- or three-factor solutions have been obtained again and again by many independent researchers, with many different research populations, and using diverse sets of trait adjectives and questionnaires. Researchers don’t tend to find two, four or six dimensions, and when they find three or five their composition almost always resembles those presented in this chapter. This is an impressive record of replication, a vital component of good science and a sign – although not a perfect one – that the solutions that have been reached are not arbitrary.

Further evidence against arbitrariness comes from studies that show quite consistently that factors akin to most of the Big Five can be detected in a variety of non-human animals (Gosling & John, 1999). These studies, which attempt to describe individual differences evident in ratings of animals’ behaviour, find that factors closely resembling Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Agreeableness are detectable in most of the species studied. For example, Agreeableness-related factors have been obtained in chimpanzees, hyenas, dogs, pigs, rats, and five other species, but not in guppies and octopuses. Openness-related factors have emerged in seven of the 12 species studied, but Conscientiousness has only appeared in chimpanzees, our closest evolutionary relatives. Might these findings be due to the ‘anthropomorphic’ projection of human traits onto other animals? This possibility seems remote because studies have employed careful and objective ratings of specific behaviours – such as frequency of vocalization and number of nose contacts as indicators of piglets’ ‘extraversion’ – rather than loose, subjective impressions. On balance, these findings provide remarkable support for the cross-species generality, and hence non-arbitrariness in humans, of most five-factor trait dimensions.

Whether there are three or five fundamental dimensions of personality, or some other number, is not a trivial issue, and it is possible that it will be conclusively resolved in the years to come. Hopefully you will now recognize that some of the differences between the rival models of personality structure are
not so unbridgeable as they might seem, and that they are differences of theoretical predilection as much as fact. This should only increase our appreciation of just how far trait psychologists have moved towards their goal of understanding personality organization.

**HOW DO MODELS OF BASIC TRAITS ADVANCE THE FIELD?**

As we have seen, there is as yet no consensus among psychologists about the fundamental structure of personality, but there is substantial agreement and most of the disagreements that remain are not radical. At this point we need to ask what is gained by determining the structure of the trait universe. Is a model of personality structure just a descriptive classification – a factual statement about personality, equivalent to saying that there are two broad types of dinosaur or 130 chemical elements – or does it also promote our understanding of personality in other ways?

Before we explore this question we should remember that an empirically sound model of personality structure is a substantial intellectual achievement, and would remain substantial even if it did little more than enumerate and describe the fundamental ways in which personalities differ. Descriptive models and classifications are indispensable for science, and are interesting in and of themselves. Nevertheless, models of the basic trait dimensions go beyond simple classification in a number of valuable ways.

The first way in which models of personality structure advance the study of personality is by providing a conceptual net for capturing specific personality characteristics. If this sounds loose and metaphorical, imagine that you are beginning a study of a little-researched trait such as cynicism or envy-proneness. If you want to understand how your trait relates to other better-known traits, you would be well advised to find out whether a measure of it correlates with fundamental personality dimensions. Because these dimensions are broad and cover the personality domain comprehensively, they provide a framework for locating your trait. Perhaps it correlates with only one factor, as cynicism might correlate negatively with Agreeableness, for instance. In this case you could infer that your trait is similar to others that are associated with that factor, and that theory and research that apply to the factor – for example, ideas about its causes and correlates – may also apply to your trait. Or perhaps your trait correlates with two or more factors, suggesting that it represents a mixture of distinct characteristics. Shyness, for example, correlates negatively with Extraversion and positively with Neuroticism. This suggests that shyness represents a blend of lack of social interest (Introversion) and social anxiety (Neuroticism). Alternatively, shy people may come in two varieties: those who
prefer being alone but tend not to be uncomfortable when in company, and those who are the reverse. Either way, locating the shyness trait’s relationship to basic personality dimensions helps to clarify it. In principle then, models of personality structure can provide coordinates for any particular personality characteristic on a multidimensional map, and these coordinates can enlighten us about the nature of that characteristic.

A second way in which models of personality structure promote psychological understanding is closely related to the first. Just as the five-factor model or Eysenck’s three factors provide frameworks for locating specific personality traits, they can help to understand psychological phenomena other than traits. Let’s say there is a phenomenon that we want to be able to understand better, such as illegal drug use, or psychological well-being, or proneness to depression. The number of personality characteristics that might predict (i.e., correlate with) these phenomena is vast and unwieldy, but the basic personality dimensions offer an economical way to cover the personality domain. A researcher can therefore investigate whether any of these dimensions correlate with the phenomenon of interest, and possibly draw some helpful inferences about it.

Imagine, for example, that we want to understand vulnerability to depression. We could assess a group of people on a measure of the Big Five and on their history of depressive episodes. Let’s say we find that people with more depression in their histories have relatively high levels of Neuroticism, and low levels of Extraversion and Openness. These findings would not allow us to say that these broad trait dimensions cause people to become depressed: maybe they are just associated with vulnerability. Nor could we confidently claim that these dimensions are the best way to conceptualize vulnerability: depression-proneness might be better understood in terms of more specific personality characteristics rather than broad factors. However, the findings would strongly suggest that personality characteristics linked to neuroticism, introversion, and lack of openness are associated with depression-proneness, and support more focused investigations of these characteristics. The findings would also count against any theory proposing that depression-proneness is a matter of having poor self-control or being overly competitive, because the factors associated with these characteristics (i.e., low Conscientiousness and Agreeableness) are not correlated with it. The broad trait dimensions can therefore help to clarify phenomena that could not be so easily clarified without them.

A third benefit that models of personality structure bring is that they point to the underlying causes of personality variation. If differences in people’s observable behaviour reliably reveal a set of basic dimensions, it is reasonable to infer that there are distinct underlying processes or structures that give rise to these dimensions. The basic personality dimensions are clearly not arbitrary – they must have some objective basis – and just like any other psychological phenomena it should be possible to locate their underpinnings. Models of
personality structure therefore guide the search for explanations of personality. If there is a trait dimension of Extraversion, for example, there ought to be some psychological or biological structures and processes whose variations underlie variations in extraversion-related behaviour. Conversely, a satisfactory explanation of Extraversion must be capable of accounting for all of the forms of psychological variation that it encompasses (e.g., sociability, interpersonal dominance, high activity levels, sensation-seeking, positive emotionality, etc.). In short, models of personality description advance our knowledge of personality explanation.

AN ILLUSTRATIVE BROAD TRAIT: CONSCIENTIOUSNESS

To illustrate the use of basic trait dimensions as variables for predicting important forms of behaviour, let us consider Conscientiousness, one of the Big Five personality factors. Researchers who have employed measures of the factor in their studies have demonstrated its associations with a wide range of outcomes. Some of the strongest correlates of Conscientiousness are found in the workplace. Barrick and Mount (1991) showed that it was more reliably associated with work performance than other personality across different occupations, different occupational levels, and multiple performance criteria (e.g., productivity, success in training, time employed, and salary). In the educational domain, finally, personality research indicates that more Conscientious students tend to show greater educational attainment (e.g., Digman, 1989).

The correlates of Conscientiousness extend well beyond the office and the classroom, however. In the domain of mental health, John, Caspi, Robins, Moffitt, and Stouthamer-Loeber (1994) found that more Conscientious adolescent boys tended to have lower levels of ‘internalizing’ (e.g., depression and anxiety) and ‘externalizing’ (e.g., delinquency, illegal drug use) pathology. In the domain of physical health, Friedman, Tucker, Tomlinson-Keasey, Schwartz, Wingard, and Criqui (1993) found that Conscientiousness measured in middle childhood was associated with longer life, because more Conscientious people took more health precautions, avoided more health-risk behaviours, coped better with stress, and had lower rates of cardiovascular disease, cancer, and violent injury. In addition to its link to the avoidance of health risks, Marshall, Wortman, Vickers, Kusulas, and Hervig (1994) found that Conscientiousness was associated with traits such as optimism and low anger expression that are linked to physical well-being. More Conscientious people also tend to be more physically fit (Hogan, 1989). In the domain of general psychological well-being, Little, Lecci, and Watkinson (1991) found that more Conscientious undergraduates had personal goals that were more in keeping with their sense of self, more organized, and more viable.
Overall, then, research evidence strongly suggests that Conscientiousness is associated with significant life outcomes in many behavioural contexts. The variety and robustness of the factor’s associations reflects favourably on its validity, and on its practical usefulness as a tool for predicting people’s behaviour, and perhaps also for understanding its determinants. These are precisely the sorts of pay-offs that trait psychologists hope to reap from their efforts to define personality structure.

**PERSONALITY AND EMOTION**

As the example of Conscientiousness shows, the Big Five personality factors are associated with a wide variety of psychology phenomena. One set of phenomena to which they are particularly relevant are emotions and moods. Emotions are relatively short-lived feeling states that involve the evaluation – positive or negative – of events that people encounter (e.g., good or bad news, praise or criticism, reassurances or threats). Moods are often distinguished from emotions for being longer-lasting, generally less intense, and less connected to particular events. A person can experience a state of mild happiness or anxiety that lasts much of the day and is not directly in response to a particular occurrence. Together, emotions and moods are often referred to as ‘affects’.

In much the same way that the structure of personality traits has been clarified, researchers have attempted to determine the basic dimensions of affective states. Although there has been some controversy over how these dimensions should be conceptualized (Feldman Barrett & Russell, 1999), factor-analytic evidence indicates that there are just two of them. The most popular and most consistently supported model labels these ‘Big Two’ dimensions Positive and Negative Affect (Watson & Tellegen, 1985). Like traits, both of these broad dimensions incorporate more specific affective states in a hierarchical fashion. Positive Affect involves emotions and moods such as joy, happiness, enthusiasm, alertness, and interest, whereas Negative Affect includes states such as sadness, anxiety, anger, disgust, and contempt. These two dimensions reliably appear across cultures and in analyses of how people report feeling at a single moment, over a short period (e.g., ‘today’), or over an extended time (e.g., ‘for the past few weeks’). Interestingly, and perhaps contrary to your intuitions, the two dimensions of affect are generally uncorrelated: the extent to which people currently or generally experience positive affective states is unrelated to the extent to which they experience negative states.

Researchers have examined whether the broad dimensions that capture individual differences in personality traits might be associated with these dimensions of affective states. One consistent finding of this work is that two of the Big Five traits converge with the affect dimensions (Meyer & Shack, 1989). Neuroticism is clearly associated with the tendency to experience negative
affects, and Extraversion with the tendency to experience positive affects. People who are high in Neuroticism are therefore not more ‘emotional’ in general, but specifically more prone to experience a diverse array of negative emotions. They are no more or less likely than people who are low in Neuroticism to experience positive affects. Similarly, in addition to being more sociable and interpersonally dominant, Extraverts are more apt to experience positive affective states, but no more likely than Introverts to experience negative affects. Some writers have gone so far as to propose that these dimensions of personality and mood have a common underlying basis. Watson and Clark (1984) refer to ‘negative affectivity’, for example, to refer to a trait dimension that is strongly associated with Neuroticism but defined in terms of the consistent tendency to experience negative moods. Similarly, they view ‘positive affectivity’ as a core feature of Extraversion.

The tight links between Extraversion and Neuroticism, on the one hand, and Positive and Negative Affect on the other, do not imply that the other major personality dimensions are entirely unrelated to emotional life. For example, one study found that negative affective states involving hostility are associated with low Agreeableness as well as Neuroticism, and that positive affective states are associated with one aspect of Conscientiousness (achievement-striving) in addition to Extraversion (Watson & Clark, 1992). In addition, personality psychologists who are interested in emotion often study specific emotion-related traits rather than broad Big Five factors. There are active research literatures on shame-proneness, guilt-proneness, anger-proneness, and disgust-sensitivity, for example. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that two of the primary dimensions of personality have particularly intimate associations with emotion.

Illustrative study: personality traits and emotion regulation across cultures

‘Emotion regulation’ is the ability to manage emotional reactions in order to achieve one’s goals. People are often faced with situations when it is desirable to modify or suppress the expression of an emotion: failing to do so may lead us to give up on an important task, say something offensive, escalate an argument, or do something socially inappropriate. Emotion regulation is also something on which cultures may differ. It has been argued, for example, that some cultures discourage emotional expression more than others, or require that individual emotion be subordinated to collective demands.

(Continued)
The American cross-cultural psychologist David Matsumoto (2006) examined differences in emotion regulation between Americans and Japanese. Previous research had suggested that Japanese participants score lower on emotion regulation than Americans, and Matsumoto aimed to explain why this might be. There is reliable evidence of differences in the mean level of five-factor model (FFM) dimensions between cultures, and Americans have been found to score higher on average than Japanese on Extraversion and Conscientiousness, and lower on Neuroticism. Given the role of Extraversion and Neuroticism in emotionality, these cultural differences in mean levels of personality traits might account for cultural differences in emotion regulation.

Matsumoto assessed large samples of Japanese (6,409) and American (1,013) adults on a questionnaire measure of the FFM and two questionnaires measuring emotion regulation. As in previous research, he found that Americans scored higher on emotion regulation - although the Japanese scored higher on a scale assessing emotion suppression - and he replicated the cross-cultural differences on the three personality factors. Statistical analysis showed that the cross-cultural difference in emotion regulation was indeed accounted for by the cross-cultural differences in personality traits.

One interesting implication of Matsumoto’s study is that some psychological differences between cultures may not be due to national differences in personality, nor culture per se. Rather than explaining differences in emotion regulation between Japan and the USA in terms of culture - shared beliefs, values, and social norms - perhaps we should refer to different average levels of traits. At some levels, such trait differences might themselves be grounded in culture: for example, in cultural differences in child-rearing beliefs and practices. Even so, this study shows how personality trait dimensions may illuminate cross-cultural research.

**SPECIFIC TRAITS**

From reading this chapter so far you may think that trait psychology consists entirely of efforts to determine the broad fundamental dimensions of personality structure. This has indeed been a major focus for researchers and theorists, but a great deal of trait psychology focuses on more specific traits. Many
psychologists working within the tradition of trait psychology aim to clarify, explain, and determine the correlates of personality characteristics that refer to more delimited patterns of behaviour, feeling, and thinking. All it takes to work within this tradition is a belief that traits are useful units of personality description and a commitment to assess and study them, whether or not one clings to a particular model of basic personality dimensions.

There are two main reasons why psychologists are often inclined to focus on specific traits rather than broad personality factors. The first has to do with the descriptive inadequacy of broad factors, and the second with their predictive inadequacy. You have probably already had some doubts about the descriptive adequacy of models such as the Big Five. Are five dimensions really enough to characterize a personality in all its richness? The answer is obviously a resounding ‘No’. As Allport and Odbert showed, human languages often supply vast numbers of trait terms to capture the subtle shades of meaning that people have found helpful in capturing one another’s individuality. To believe that the Big Five is sufficient to describe individual personalities is to imagine falsely that their 4,500 trait terms are essentially synonyms of ten basic personality characteristics (i.e., high and low on each factor). We usually aren’t satisfied to know that a person is relatively high in Neuroticism, but want to know in what forms and under what circumstances this emotionality is expressed (e.g., is the person typically shy, angry, jumpy, moody, sad, tense, guilty, high-strung, under-confident ...?).

The predictive adequacy of broad personality factors may not have struck you as being as questionable as their descriptive adequacy. However, it is often true that broad personality factors correlate less strongly with psychological phenomena than the more specific traits that define them. For example, Paunonen and Ashton (2001) found that Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience predicted performance in an undergraduate psychology course modestly or not at all (correlations were .21 and -.04, respectively). However, narrower traits that were related to these factors – ‘achievement’ and ‘need for understanding’ – correlated somewhat more strongly (.26 and .23). Similarly, DeNeve and Cooper (1998) investigated personality predictors of subjective well-being, and found that Neuroticism and Extraversion correlated -.27 and .20, respectively. However, several specific traits demonstrated stronger correlations, including desire for control, hardiness, trust, repressive-defensiveness, and a tendency to think that events are primarily due to chance (the last two traits correlated negatively with well-being). In short, broad personality factors are often outperformed as predictors by the traits that are supposedly less basic.

These descriptive and predictive limitations of broad models of personality are unquestionably real. However, they are not really failures of the models, although personality psychologists who are opposed to them sometimes make this claim. The five-factor model and others make no claims to provide a
sufficient set of dimensions for characterizing individuals or predicting particular psychological phenomena. They are organizing frameworks only, ways of classifying personality characteristics in an economical and encompassing fashion that aspire to reveal some deeper truth about the underlying structure (and maybe also the causes) of individual differences. Advocates of broad factors are not claiming that specific traits are *nothing but* the factors that they are associated with, just as no one claims that parrots and penguins are nothing but birds. Instead, they argue that each specific trait has its own specific content as well as some degree of overlap with broad factors, and that these factors reflect ways in which specific traits tend to go together. By analogy, parrots and penguins each have their own distinctive features, but they also share certain underlying similarities which make them both examples of the broad grouping of birds.

Similarly, advocates of broad personality factors make no claims about the predictive superiority of these factors. In fact, it would be surprising if more specific traits were *not* frequently better predictors of behaviour than broad factors. First, such factors comprise many specific traits, and unless every trait is equally predictive of the behaviour in question, some traits must be more predictive than the factor of which they are a part. Second, specific traits refer to narrower patterns of behaviour than traits, so they should be able to predict relatively narrow or context-specific kinds of behaviour in a more focused and hence stronger manner. Consider the case of sensation-seeking, presented in Figure 2.1 near the beginning of this chapter. If the behaviour to be predicted were taking out a raunchy personals ad in a magazine, then the specific trait that is narrowly focused on the sexual domain (i.e., sexual sensation-seeking) should predict better than the broader, less domain-focused trait (i.e., sensation-seeking). By incorporating non-sexual domains of sensation-seeking, whose relevance to sexuality is weaker than sexual sensation-seeking, the broader trait’s capacity to predict sexual behaviour will be diluted. Extraversion, whose coverage of behavioural domains and contexts is even broader than sensation-seeking, should have an even more diluted capacity to predict sexual adventurism. By this reasoning, broader traits tend to predict specific behaviours more weakly than certain narrow traits. But by the same reasoning, as you may have noticed, broader traits will tend to predict a greater range of behaviour: more behaviours fall within their field of relevance. Thus, although broad personality factors often predict behaviour less strongly than specific traits, this is neither an embarrassment to proponents of these factors nor a sign of their overall predictive inferiority.

In any event, given that broad personality factors like the Big Five have some limitations, both in allowing fine-grained personality description and in predicting specific behaviours, psychologists have energetically pursued the study of specific traits. Often they have done so in the hope of illuminating a particular set of psychological phenomena. The number of traits that have been investigated is huge, but a small selection of some of the most interesting examples offers a flavour of the enterprise.
Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism is a specific trait that has been investigated by psychologists who want to understand the roots of prejudice. This programme of work was begun by Adorno Frenteel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950), who sought to explain the extreme and genocidal hatred of the Nazi regime towards Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and others. By their working understanding, embodied in a popular questionnaire (the California F-scale), the trait had several distinct components. These include an uncritical and submissive acceptance of societal authorities, deeply conventional values, thinking that is based on superstition and rigid categories, a tendency to project one's own impulses onto others and be punitive towards them, cynicism and misanthropy, and a reluctance to introspect. Although this formulation and the F-scale are controversial, recent work has shown authoritarianism to be a strong and reliable predictor of individual differences in prejudiced attitudes (Whitley, 1999). In Big Five terms, authoritarianism appears to be characterized primarily by low Openness and high Conscientiousness (Heaven & Bucci, 2001).

Self-monitoring

Self-monitoring is a trait that is most pertinent to the presentation of self in public behaviour. According to its originator (Snyder, 1974), the concept refers to the degree of consistency people display both between their inner selves and their public personas, and in their public behaviour across different situations. ‘High self-monitors’ show relatively little consistency, flexibly shaping their public presentation to fit the demands of the situation and their audience. ‘Low self-monitors’, in contrast, tend to display the same personal attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions regardless of the situation and audience, demonstrating what can be understood either as an admirable fidelity to their true selves or as a stubborn lack of social sensitivity. High self-monitoring predicts a variety of social psychological phenomena, such as being willing to use deception to get a date (Rowatt, Cunningham, & Druen, 1998) and being responsive to persuasive messages that emphasize enhancing one's personal image rather than expressing personal values (Lavine & Snyder, 1996).

Attachment styles

Attachment style refers to a set of personality characteristics that are particularly relevant to close relationships. Inspired by developmental psychology research on the different ways in which infants and toddlers react to separation from their caregivers, studies of attachment styles in adults present them as
basic orientations to intimate relationships. Three styles are often recognized, each marked by distinctive approaches to forming and conducting emotional bonds, and responding to challenges to them (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). People with a ‘secure’ attachment style are comfortable with closeness and mutual dependency and are not preoccupied with the possibility of abandonment. The ‘avoidant’ style is associated with a lack of trust in others, and a reluctance to become close or dependent on another. ‘Anxious/ambivalent’ people, finally, tend to desire more intimacy than their partner and want it more quickly, and are concerned about being abandoned or not loved enough.

These three traits are associated with a host of intriguing differences in psychological phenomena within close relationships. Not surprisingly, secure individuals experience the most trust, satisfaction, and commitment in their romantic relationships. Anxious/ambivalent people have the lowest self-esteem and satisfaction with their romantic relationships, are most prone to jealousy, obsessive preoccupation with and sexual attraction to others, and belief in love at first sight, and report having had fathers who were unfair. Avoidant people have the strongest fear of closeness, fail to seek support from a partner when under stress, and report having cold and rejecting mothers. When brought into a lab to discuss a relationship problem with their romantic partners (Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996), they show little negative emotion, remain distant and unsupportive (especially men), and report no change in feelings of love and commitment after the discussion. Anxious/ambivalent people, in contrast, show anger and upset during the discussion and reduced love and commitment after it, and securely attached people showed little distress and then more positive evaluations of the relationship.

In one fascinating study, Fraley and Shaver (1998) examined a setting where romantic couples frequently separate, and where attachment behaviour might therefore be particularly notable. They had a research assistant approach couples at an airport and ask them to complete a short questionnaire, which included a measure of attachment styles. Unknown to the couples, another research assistant then observed them until one or both of them departed, coding specific kinds of attachment-related behaviour. Fraley and Shaver found a number of correlations between participants’ attachment styles and these behaviours for separating couples. More avoidantly attached women, for example, engaged in less ‘contact seeking’ behaviour (e.g., kissing, embracing, turning back after leaving), less ‘caregiving’ (e.g., stroking, whispering ‘I love you’), and more ‘avoidance’ behaviours (e.g., looking away from the partner, breaking off contact, hurrying the separation). In short, attachment styles reveal themselves in naturalistic settings, and are clearly important specific traits for making sense of close relationships.
Type A

Type A personality is a characteristic that has been most intensively studied by psychologists interested in predicting risk for coronary heart disease, a major cause of death in most industrialized societies. Cardiologists had long suspected that people who suffered from heart disease tended to have a distinctive personality style, and Type A was an attempt to capture it (Friedman & Rosenman, 1974). Type A personalities are described as competitive, given to excessive achievement striving, vigorous in their activity and speech patterns, hostile, and impatient and pressured in their attitude towards time. Research has repeatedly linked Type A to a moderately increased risk for the development of heart disease, and suggests that hostility is the most toxic of its components, the one most strongly associated with coronary risk. This association may be partly due to an increased engagement in health-damaging behaviours and partly due to more direct physiological effects of chronic hostility on the body.

The specific traits sketched here illustrate a tiny fraction of the personality characteristics that have been studied by trait psychologists. Note how they illuminate psychological phenomena in specific domains – attitudes towards outgroups, self-presentation, close relationships, physical health – by focusing on specific kinds of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Note also how none of these specific traits corresponds precisely to any trait term in English. Instead, they are theoretical entities or ‘constructs’ that have been proposed, assessed, and studied by researchers. Specific traits need not be drawn from the everyday lexicon, which clearly does not exhaust the trait universe.

CONCLUSION

The psychology of traits starts from some intuitively sensible premises. It assumes that personality characteristics encoded in ordinary language are useful units of personality description, and that their structure can be determined by studying empirical consistencies in thinking, feeling, and behaving. On these pillars – the trait lexicon and the humble correlation coefficient (and its factor-analytic descendant) – elaborate and robust accounts of personality structure have been built. In addition, a great assortment of specific traits has been investigated. The language of personality description that has emerged from this enterprise seems to be both systematic and comprehensive. Its practical utility is shown by an enormous research literature that demonstrates the capacity of traits to predict a wide range of psychological phenomena. Trait psychology would appear to give us a very solid foundation for personality description.
Chapter summary

- A major task of personality psychology is to develop systematic ways of describing and classifying individual differences, or determining the 'structure' of personality.
- A major unit for the description of personality is the 'personality trait', an enduring disposition (or tendency) to think, feel, or behave in a particular, patterned way.
- Traits are hierarchically organized. They vary in how broad or general they are, some relating to very specific or narrow types of behaviour and others to wide ranges of behaviour, and broader traits may incorporate many more specific traits.
- Personality psychologists have made efforts to classify the structure of traits for more than 70 years, starting from the thousands of trait words available in everyday language and distilling these into a smaller number of broad trait dimensions.
- This process of distillation has involved the analysis of correlations (i.e., associations) among different traits. These correlations are examined using 'factor analysis', a statistical procedure that finds groupings of correlated traits and infers the presence of broad dimensions that underlie them.
- Factor-analytic research first distilled traits into 16 factors or dimensions, and then further reduced them to five. The five factors have increasingly come to represent the scientific consensus on personality structure, and are referred to as the 'Big Five' or the 'five-factor model'.
- The five factors are Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness to Experience. They serve as a useful framework for personality description and explanation, and they are associated with a wide variety of psychological phenomena.
- Alternative models of personality structure based on only three factors have also been proposed.
- Although broad factors play an important role in personality description, many more specific traits have also been the focus of personality research and theory. These specific traits may be more effective in predicting behaviour than broader traits.
Further Reading


  *This long chapter reviews evidence supporting the validity and utility of Eysenck's three-factor model of personality trait dimensions, including discussions of their proposed biological bases.*


  *This chapter lays out the historical development of the five-factor model of personality, and reviews relevant research and theory on the nature of the factors and their optimal measurement.*


  *This is a thorough, up-to-date and readable presentation of contemporary personality psychology from the trait perspective.*


  *For those who want a more comprehensive discussion of the five-factor model of personality, this book offers an up-to-date review of an enormous body of research.*