

Chapter 1

Introduction to Personality Theory

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Define personality.
2. Differentiate theory from (a) philosophy, (b) speculation, (c) hypothesis, and (d) taxonomy.
3. Defend the need for more than one theory.
4. Explain the relationship between the life stories of various theorists and their theories.
5. Explain the relationship between theory and observations.
6. List and explain the criteria of a useful theory.
7. Explain why falsifiability is a positive characteristic of a theory.
8. Discuss various components for a concept of humanity.
9. Define reliability and validity, and explain why both the concepts are important in personality research.

Lecture Outline

For centuries, philosophers, theologians, and other thinkers have asked these questions as they pondered the nature of human nature—or even wondered whether humans have a basic nature. More than 100 years ago, however, Sigmund Freud began to combine philosophical speculations with a primitive scientific method. As a neurologist trained in science, Freud began to listen to his patients to find out what hidden conflicts lay behind their assortment of symptoms.

Freud, in fact, was the first to develop a truly modern theory of personality, based mostly on his clinical observations. He developed a “Grand Theory,” that is, one that attempted to explain all personality for all people. The general trend over the course of the 20th century was to base theories more and more on scientific observations rather than on clinical ones. Both sources, however, are valid foundations for theories of personality.

I. What Is Personality?

Psychologists differ among themselves as to the meaning of personality. Most agree that the term “personality” originated from the Latin word **persona**, which referred to a theatrical mask worn by Roman actors in Greek dramas. However, personality theorists have not agreed on a single definition of personality.

Although no single definition is acceptable to all personality theorists, one can say that **personality** is a pattern of relatively permanent traits and unique characteristics that give both

consistency and individuality to a person's behavior (Roberts & Mroczek, 2008). **Traits** contribute to individual differences in behavior, consistency of behavior over time, and stability of behavior across situations. **Characteristics** are unique qualities of an individual that include attributes such as temperament, physique, and intelligence.

II. What Is a Theory?

The word "theory" has the dubious distinction of being one of the most misused and misunderstood words in the English language. In science, theories are tools used to generate research and organize observations, but neither "truth" nor "fact" has a place in scientific terminology.

A. Theory Defined

A scientific **theory** is *a set of related assumptions that allows scientists to use logical deductive reasoning to formulate testable hypotheses.*

B. Theory and Its Relatives

People sometimes confuse theory with philosophy, or speculation, or hypothesis, or taxonomy. Although theory is related to each of these concepts, it is not the same as any of them.

First, theory is related to philosophy, but it is a much narrower term. Philosophy encompasses several branches, one of which is **epistemology**, or the nature of knowledge. Theory relates most closely to this branch of philosophy, because it is a tool used by scientists in their pursuit of knowledge. Second, theories rely on speculation, but they are much more than mere armchair speculation. They are closely tied to empirically gathered data and to science. **Science** is a branch of study concerned with the observation and classification of data and with the verification of general laws through the testing of hypotheses.

A good theory is capable of generating many hypotheses. A **hypothesis** is an educated guess or prediction specific enough for its validity to be tested through the use of the scientific method. A **taxonomy** is a classification of things according to their natural relationships. Taxonomies are essential for the development of science because without classification of data science could not grow.

C. Why Different Theories?

Alternate theories exist because the very nature of a theory allows the theorist to make speculations from a particular point of view. Theorists must be as objective as possible when gathering data, but their decisions as to what data are collected and how these data are interpreted are personal ones. All theories are a reflection of their authors' personal backgrounds, childhood experiences, philosophy of life, interpersonal relationships, and unique manner of looking at the world. Because observations are colored by an individual observer's

frame of reference, it follows that there may be many diverse theories.

D. Perspectives in Theories of Personality

One of the primary functions of scientific theory is to describe and explain how the world works. Psychologists attempt to explain how human thoughts, emotions, motives, and behaviors work. Yet human personality is so complex that many different perspectives have developed on how to best explain them.

Beginning with Freud, psychoanalytic and then the more general psychodynamic approaches have focused on the importance of early childhood experiences and on relationships with parents as guiding forces that shape personality development. Psychoanalysis traditionally used dream interpretation to uncover the unconscious thoughts, feelings, and impulses as a main form of treatment of neurosis and mental illness.

The primary assumption of the humanistic (currently known as “positive psychology”) approach is that people strive toward meaning, growth, well-being, happiness, and psychological health. States of positive emotion and happiness foster psychological health and prosocial behavior.

Dispositional theorists argue that the unique and long-term tendencies to behave in particular ways are the essence of one’s personality. These unique dispositions, such as extraversion or anxiety, are called traits.

Behavior, thoughts, feelings, and personality are influenced by differences in basic genetic, epigenetic, and neurological systems among individuals. The reason some people have different traits, dispositions, and ways of thinking stems from differences in their genotype and central nervous system (brain structures and neurochemistry).

All behaviors are learned through association and/or its consequences (whether it is reinforced or punished). To shape desired behaviors, people must understand and then establish the conditions that bring about those particular behaviors. The cognitive perspective argues that how people think about themselves and other people, as well as the assumptions they make and the strategies they use for solving problems, are the keys to understanding differences among people.

E. Theorists’ Personalities and Their Theories of Personality

Because personality theories grow from theorists’ own personalities, a study of those personalities is appropriate. In recent years a subdiscipline of psychology called **psychology of science** has begun to look at personal traits of scientists. The psychology of science studies both science and the behavior of scientists; that is, it investigates the impact of an individual scientist’s psychological processes and personal characteristics on the development of her or his scientific theories and research (Feist, 1993, 1994, 2006; Feist & Gorman, 1998; Gholson,

Shadish, Neimeyer, & Houts, 1989).

F. What Makes a Theory Useful?

A useful theory has a mutual and dynamic interaction with research data. A useful theory (1) generates research, (2) is falsifiable, (3) organizes data, (4) guides action, (5) is internally consistent, and (6) is parsimonious.

The most important criterion of a useful theory is its ability to stimulate and guide further research. A useful theory will generate two different kinds of research: descriptive research and hypothesis testing. *Descriptive research*, which can expand an existing theory, is concerned with the measurement, labeling, and categorization of the units employed in theory building. The second kind of research generated by a useful theory, *hypothesis testing*, leads to an indirect verification of the usefulness of the theory.

A theory must also be evaluated on its ability to be confirmed or disconfirmed; that is, it must be **falsifiable**. To be falsifiable, a theory must be precise enough to suggest research that may either support or fail to support its major tenets.

A useful theory should also be able to organize those research data that are not incompatible with each other. Without some organization or classification, research findings would remain isolated and meaningless.

A fourth criterion of a useful theory is its ability to guide the practitioner over the rough course of day-to-day problems. For example, parents, teachers, business managers, and psychotherapists are confronted continually with an avalanche of questions for which they try to find workable answers. Good theory provides a structure for finding many of those answers. Without a useful theory, practitioners would stumble in the darkness of trial and error techniques; with a sound theoretical orientation, they can discern a suitable course of action.

A good theory will use concepts and terms that have been clearly and operationally defined. An **operational definition** is one that defines units in terms of observable events or behaviors that can be measured.

When two theories are equal in their ability to generate research, be falsified, give meaning to data, guide the practitioner, and be self-consistent, the simpler one is preferred. This is the law of **parsimony**.

III. Dimensions for a Concept of Humanity

Personality theories differ on basic issues concerning the nature of humanity. Each personality theory reflects its author's assumptions about humanity. These assumptions rest on several broad dimensions that separate the various personality theorists.

The first dimension is *determinism versus free choice*. A second issue is one of *pessimism versus optimism*. A third dimension for viewing a theorist's concept of humanity is *causality versus teleology*. Briefly, **causality** holds that behavior is a function of past experiences, whereas **teleology** is an explanation of behavior in terms of future goals or purposes. A fourth consideration that divides personality theorists is their attitude toward *conscious versus unconscious determinants of behavior*. The fifth question is one of *biological versus social influences on personality*. A sixth issue is *uniqueness versus similarities*.

These and other basic issues that separate personality theorists have resulted in truly different personality theories, not merely differences in terminology.

IV. Research in Personality Theory

The primary criterion for a useful theory is its ability to generate research. Theories and research data have a cyclic relationship: Theory gives meaning to data, and data result from experimental research designed to test hypotheses generated by the theory.

To improve their ability to predict, personality psychologists have developed a number of assessment techniques, including personality inventories. For these instruments to be useful they must be both reliable and valid. The **reliability** of a measuring instrument is the extent to which it yields consistent results. Personality inventories may be reliable and yet lack validity or accuracy. **Validity** is the degree to which an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure.