Chapter 1

Basic Issues: How to Approach the Study of Personality Theories

...neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands.

William James

It will happen for a time, that the pupil will find his intellectual power has grown by the study of his master’s mind. But in all unbalanced minds, the classification is idolized, passes for the end, and not for a speedily exhaustible means, so that the walls of the system blend to their eye in the remote horizon with the walls of the universe.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Nothing is real 'til it’s local.

Anonymous

A USEFUL METAPHOR: THE MASK AND THE PERSON BENEATH

“The terms personality in English, personnalité in French, and personlichkeit in German closely resemble the personalitas of medieval Latin. In classical Latin persona alone was used. All scholars agree that this word originally meant ‘mask.’” These words were written by the American psychologist, Gordon Allport (Allport, 1961, p. 25).

Allport further traced the meaning of the term persona to an even earlier phrase in Latin: per sonare, meaning “to sound through.” The phrase “per sonare” or, literally, “to make sound through” referred to the mouthpiece of the theatrical mask through which an actor’s voice was projected. Subsequent meanings as cited by Allport demonstrate that the meaning of the term persona slowly evolved to a more abstract designation indicating the appearance—the mask—and referring also to the person beneath it (Allport, 1961). The mask metaphor frequently occurs in personality theories and is a major theme in this text.

Allport has noted the difference between his approach to personality and that of Freud: Allport was one of the founders of academic personality theory. He did his graduate dissertation in the area of personality theory and developed the first college course on the subject of personality, which he taught with a great sense of mission from the 1930s through the 1960s at Harvard University.
In 1962, Allport recounted the courage and emerging sense of self-direction that had been necessary for him as a young graduate student to pursue the field of personality as a subject for his dissertation:

... each graduate student was allowed to say in two or three minutes what he was working on for his Ph.D. thesis. It came around to my turn and I said I was trying to make an experimental study of the traits of the human personality. Titchener [a leading experimental psychologist] glared at me. . . . [t]he silence seemed like an hour but probably it was a minute. . . . It was a cruel cut for a young graduate student! (Allport, 1962, p. 3)

Allport continued that his more supportive mentor, who had seen the event, later took him aside and said,

“Oh, you don’t care what Titchener thinks.” And it suddenly occurred to me I didn’t care—it was irrelevant. I think that event probably was a benign trauma because over the succeeding years, I have not cared what my colleagues thought and that’s been fortunate. I have definitely been a maverick, a minority deviant in modern psychology. But, I couldn’t care less. It doesn’t trouble me and I think this early experience has something to do with it. (Allport, 1962, p. 3)

BEGINNING THE STUDY OF PERSONALITY: A PERSONAL NOTE

I remember that, as an undergraduate science major taking a personality psychology course1 for the first time, I thought it would be a course about only the superficial, surface aspect of people. One of my quickly corrected misconceptions was that it would be a course about popularity, charisma, or personal attractiveness. Some people, I thought, had a “lot of personality” and others did not. I wondered if it was plausible to teach a whole course around this subject.

When I first entered the course, I found that the professor often spoke about the surface of a person—the observable behaviors. It turned out that only some of these behaviors had to do with popularity. I shortly discovered that the personality course also looked beneath the surface to probe the depths of human nature. At times, it went far beneath the surface—beneath the mask.

And the adventure I began then in learning to look beneath the surface, to understand or “stand under” the surface, has continued throughout my life and in my work. This adventure has enriched my life and the lives of many other students of personality. Christopher Monte was certainly fascinated and gained much insight over the years by endeavoring to understand the topic of personality and to explore in some depth the personalities of the theorists themselves.

One concept that intrigued me even as a science major entering a personality course was that the human personality is a fundamental unit and level of organization. Knowing a lot about atoms and molecules did not seem to lead directly to much knowledge about personality. Furthermore, personality seemed to be a vital level to study as it was somewhere between the microscopic on one hand and the great dimensions of culture, society, and history on the other. In addition, persons are sentient and conscious beings. I did not think it possible to attribute these qualities to molecules, to nations, or to galaxies.

Around this time I discovered the philosophy of personalism, which recognized the inherent value and dignity of the human person. It questioned any type of subordination of the individual to political or economic structures or even to cultural trends. Some spiritual teachings indicated that saving the life of a person was equivalent to rescuing

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1Professor Gordon Allport taught this course.
a whole world from destruction. At any rate, personality seemed a topic well worthy of study—even to my mind so steeped in a scientific subculture.

In addition, there was the sense of mystery and unknowability about personality. How many people fully understand themselves? How many of us can describe our own personalities accurately? Most of us are, at best, knowledgeable about a few other people and ourselves. New acquaintances may appear mysterious and unpredictable to us until we construct a theory that is more or less adequate to explain and predict their behavior. I was hoping that the Theories of Personality course might provide tools for me to gain greater insight into the people around me, and into myself as well.

As you encounter the theories in this text, it will be interesting to notice if and how the person-mask dichotomy is handled. A theorist may be concerned with peripheral variables that are easily observable—mask, or with central variables that touch upon the very core—the inner person. Some psychologists see no reason to look for "an inner person" when overt behavior is adequate for scientific study or prediction and control of specific behaviors. These psychologists think that theories of personality should attend only to observable behavior with no inferences or assumptions about an inner core of experience. And a few theorists do not make the distinction between the outer and the inner.

Those theorists who tried to integrate the inner and outer perspectives hoped personality psychology would be able to reconstruct the whole person and weld together the elements of person and mask into a unified framework. Sigmund Freud emphasized the distinction between the surface and what was beneath it and included aspects of both in his model of the psyche. Carl Gustav Jung considered the persona to be the image presented to others, the social role, as contrasted with the sum total of the person’s conscious and unconscious psychic life. He viewed it as one part of a more inclusive whole, which he termed the psyche.

ONE TRUTH OR MANY PERSPECTIVES?

When you start to explore the different theories of personality, you will discover many ways of looking at and making sense of personality. The theories are different in their assumptions, the data or evidence they consider, and their conclusions. Some seem diametrically opposed. It is helpful to realize that, if all psychologists agreed on only one way of looking at personality, then there would be no need for a text about "theories" of personality. We could proceed with a single theory that is accepted by all. There is, particularly in academic settings, a tendency for some specialists to advocate a single theory. Perhaps you have had a professor who is such an adherent. Advocating a single theory is useful for focus and for networking, but the subject of personality is so complex that it is difficult to imagine how one single theory would suffice to explain all that we need to know about human behavior.

A Latin phrase is relevant: Cave hominem unius libri. Translated literally, it means “Beware the man of one book.” It means that people who have a single slant or perspective do not have a balanced or reliable view. This is true of psychology. The well-educated psychologist has a broad background and is familiar with many views and theories even though he or she may prefer and be committed to a specific approach. Every theory has some strengths and some weaknesses, and we should be honest enough, even when we prefer a given approach, to be aware of its shortcomings.

Another concept that may be helpful to students of personality is the limitation of reductionism, or what could be termed “nothing-but-ism.” A biologist, considering the cell to be the building block of life, may conclude that life is nothing but the
behavior of cells. A Freudian may notice nothing but psychodynamics. A behaviorist who has studied patterns of reinforcement and extinction, may conclude that behavior is nothing but those patterns. A cognitive theorist may conclude that personality is nothing but the result of cognitive structures or schemas.

Some personality theorists themselves were passionately involved in trying to prove or argue that their theories were true and that others were false. Some of the theorists were inspired by the idea that their predecessors’ ideas—particularly in the case of Freud—were in some way limited or wrong. Allport, for example, is known to have repeated the unattributed quote that, as far as the unconscious was concerned, “Freud went down deeper, stayed longer and came up dirtier than anyone else.” [I suspect that this was one of Allport’s own favorite sayings.] Freud, for his part, pushed Alfred Adler out of being the editor of a psychoanalytic journal. He wrote, “I have finally got rid of Adler. . . . The damage is not great.” (Freud, in Freud & Jung, 1974, p. 376)

Such feuding is unprofessional and often seems silly, but we need to acknowledge that it is a consequence of the commitment the theorists had to their own particular vision of reality. Sigmund Freud wanted people to acknowledge and understand that their real motives were often not as lofty and idealistic as they thought—to acknowledge that they were often hypocrites regarding sex and aggression. He wanted humankind to be elevated by a small group of psychoanalyzed people with a high degree of self-knowledge, insight and rationality. Gordon Allport was concerned about the loss of individuality that was accompanying the rise of psychological science. Carl Jung had a deep commitment to understanding the spiritual dimension of human existence, and Carl Rogers wanted psychologists and people in general to view personal freedom as a fundamental goal. The descriptions and theories of personality by these individuals are not mere neutral descriptions. Their visions of what life is and what life should be are as distinctive and different as the visions of artists such as a Vincent Van Gogh, Norman Rockwell, or Thomas Eakins.

Students of personality thus have a problem. How can we come to grips with various theories with differing concepts when each proclaims itself to be uniquely true? One answer comes from the philosophy of pluralism—the notion that there are many realities and that more than one perspective may be correct. Regarding the theories of Freud and Rogers, for example, it could be that their life experiences and thinking revealed to each of them a different aspect of personality. A phenomenological psychologist would say that each was attuned, or open, to different realities.

It is an intellectual and emotional challenge for both the beginning and advanced student of personality theory to understand the differences between the theorists without siding immediately with one or a few and against the others. Cognitive developmental theorists would see the steps in addressing this challenge as first one of seeing some...
value in all theories, and then finally adopting a specific point of view to which one may become committed (Perry, 1970). This process is parallel on a higher level to the ability to take different visual perspectives—to imagine, for example, what a group of objects might look like when seen from the side or from the back, and then choosing a preferred perspective.

The theorists themselves occasionally tried to understand why they disagreed with their colleagues. Jung was perplexed by the differences between Freud and those around him, including Adler and Jung himself. He said that he developed the theory of psychological types to explain these huge differences. In other words, their conceptions of personality were different because they were temperamentally different.

In this text, we point out that these theorists had different life experiences—especially different childhood experiences. They spent their formative years under a variety of historical, social, and cultural influences, took different paths in life, and had different values. We will see how many theories of personality arose as a creative response on the part of a theorist to the difficult circumstances and challenges of his or her life. Furthermore, each of their life histories occurred within a specific context. In brief, we find that each of the major personality theorists was aware of different aspects of experience and of personality.

What approach do we take in presenting most of the actual theories of personality in this text? We follow the history of each theory’s development and demonstrate its progression through the “changes of mind” that its creator may have experienced. We seek to illuminate each theorist’s own struggle to understand human nature.

PERSONALITY THEORIES AS CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO PERSONAL PROBLEMS

One question often arises when students think about a career in psychology or in one of the other mental health professions: If I have difficult psychological problems, does this necessarily make me less qualified to help others? The answer is demonstrated in the troubled lives of some of the major personality theorists. Personal problems may provide a source of understanding and of personal growth, but having such problems, however, is neither a necessary nor sufficient background for a person to become a creative theorist. Psychological problems often have the silver lining of drawing a person’s attention to the realm of personality and to the necessity of developing self-knowledge and the knowledge of others. This is true of many people who intend to make helping others psychologically a career focus. Once a person’s attention is focused on their problems, they should work toward a successful resolution of them.

A theory of personality and of psychotherapy is often a theorist’s means of passing on his or her personal approach or solution to life’s difficulties to others. For example, we will find in the case of Sigmund Freud an intense and unwavering introspection, with Carl Jung an ability to merge visions and fantastic inner experiences, with Carl Rogers a focus on an optimistic approach to the challenges of the present, and with Erik Erikson an attempt to develop a unique identity. We take the position in this book that we want to understand the personality theories deeply and unforgottably by trying to understand something about the lives of the theorists and how and why they developed the theories for which they are known.

This approach has the advantage that we will see some theories in terms of the life experiences of the personality theorists and in the social-historical contexts from which the theories emerged. It will become clear, for example, how Freud’s theory was a response to many of the difficulties of his own life as well as a response to...
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BOX 1.2  Only Connect...

Ellenberger’s concept of creative illness is similar to the mythic theme of the “wounded healer” found in many cultures and literatures throughout history. The insights and healing abilities of the “wounded healer” emerge from his or her struggles with pain, suffering, illness and injury. As we will see in Chapter 5, Carl Jung labeled such universal themes archetypes and believed they were part of the collective unconscious of all humans. In Jung’s view, the personality theorists that we consider to have a creative illness would be considered to be wounded healers. Jung’s own life experience can be understood within this framework.

upper-middle-class European morality at the end of the nineteenth century. Decades later, Carl Rogers’ more optimistic theory of personality was deeply connected to and reflective of his own approach to life and affected by trends in American culture and society in the middle of the twentieth century.

Henri Ellenberger (1970) has advanced the notion that a wide range of influential psychological theories have their origins in what he termed the creative illnesses of their creators. A creative illness, or a psychological malady deeply intertwined with a creative process and perhaps contributing to it, can take a variety of forms, ranging in intensity from mild anxiety through neurotic maladjustment to psychotic separations from reality (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 447). The dominating preoccupation in a creative illness is absorption with some intellectual-creative problem involving attempts to make social reality intelligible. The stricken, creatively ill persons become intensely preoccupied with a search for the truth; they become absorbed with self, suffering intense feelings of isolation until, suddenly, the suffering ends abruptly. The termination period is often marked by feelings of exhilaration: “The subject emerges from his ordeal with a permanent transformation in his personality and the conviction that he has discovered a great truth or a new spiritual world” (Ellenberger, 1970, p. 48). Ellenberger regards such major figures as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung as illustrative cases. He believes they had each resolved their creative illness through the creation of a generalized theory of human nature.

Ellenberger’s concept of creative illness is a valuable one. Dramatic and acute personal disturbances are involved in the origination of many theories. In addition to Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the clearest cases for creative illness in the theorists we review in Beneath the Mask can be made for Alfred Adler, Erik Erikson, and Rollo May. There is less certainty regarding Karen Horney and Carl Rogers. In other instances, such as that of Bandura’s social cognitive approach, the creative illness hypothesis does not appear relevant.

WHAT ABOUT ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY?

Most personality theory textbooks do not focus on the specific topic of abnormal psychology. That is another discipline and is centered on the causes, descriptions, diagnoses, and treatments of pathological conditions. Such a project is outside the scope of this text. Much of the formal field of abnormal psychology falls within the medical model of mental disorder. Yet, there is a good deal of overlap between the two fields even though their emphases are very different. Within each chapter of the present text, we will thus consider how each theorist approaches—if at all—the question of psychopathology.
What About Abnormal Psychology?

From their onset, many theories of personality were constructed with close attention to the abnormal. Psychopathology was seen as an extreme example. By deciphering what had gone wrong in atypical cases, principles could be derived that would explain the typical. With some exceptions, theorists peered into the depths of their own and others’ psychopathology to construct their vision of general personality functioning. Sigmund Freud began the trend as early as 1895 with his first model of personality that he described as a “general psychology” with equal importance for normal and abnormal functioning (Freud, 1895, pp. 283–284). But, in truth, his neurologically-based theory of personality was derived largely from the treatment of hysterical conversion and other “neurotic” disorders.

Other personality theories had little basis in psychopathology and were based on studying normal or exceptionally healthy or creative people. Gordon Allport’s trait theory and Abraham Maslow’s concept of self-actualization are two such theories, as is George Kelly’s idea that each person is a theory-builder, which is an example of a theory having to do with normal, active coping. Maslow’s study of “self-actualization” is parallel to medicine’s consideration of “wellness” as more than the simple absence of disease.

It is important to consider that our points of view and values are sometimes involved in the judgment of what is pathological and what is not. One example is that in totalitarian societies with great pressure for conformity, holding certain political opinions may be taken as evidence of psychopathology. In the 1980s, to take a much-noted example, many Soviet dissidents were hospitalized with the diagnosis of “creeping schizophrenia.” This diagnosis was based largely on their opinions, social activism, and, in some cases, judgments reinforced by their belief in God. One of the authors of the present book was acquainted with a street person hospitalized in one of our local medical centers. The street person viewed his mania as a valuable mental state. As expected, he quit taking his medications after discharge. Many children who are currently diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) and hyperactivity might have not been so diagnosed only a few years ago. We might ask whether more children are now suffering from this condition or whether our criteria have changed as a result of different expectations. A person with a pattern of changing jobs and partners may be viewed as self-actualizing, narcissistic, or unstable depending on one’s perspective. There are many reasons to believe that diagnostic criteria are highly context-dependent.

In addition, as we explore the different personality theories, we will find different explanations for pathology, such as inadequate defenses (Freud), blockage of personal growth (Rogers), responses to hypercompetitive upbringing (Horney), or lack of balance in psychological development (Jung). For example, let us examine the case of a college student who is showing signs of clinical depression and may receive a corresponding diagnosis. Different theories of personality would often lead to varying ways of conceptualizing and understanding the phenomenon of depression. A Freudian psychoanalyst may suspect that the depression is caused by vulnerabilities stemming from the person’s childhood experiences. But a Jungian or a practitioner informed by the theories of Erik Erikson may see the depression in terms of having unfulfilled potential for adventure or for involvement and caring behavior. Adlerians might see it as resulting from a lifestyle of avoiding challenges, and psychologists in the tradition of Karen Horney might analyze it as a reaction to unloving parenting involving an emphasis on hypercompetitive behavior. A behaviorist may see the depression as a response to a reduced amount of positive reinforcement in this student’s environment. A cognitive theorist might consider the depression a consequence of the student’s negative views or self-talk. And a psychopharmacologically-oriented

practitioner may view the depression in terms of serotonin depletion. These varying explanations have different implications for our attitude toward, and treatment of, depression. What is confusing is that these explanations are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Psychology does not have as many elaborately defined categories for normal or healthy behavior as for the pathological. This gap reflects a century of emphasizing disorders and deficiencies. In the study of personality we want to try to understand and use theories that explain not only pathological behavior but also normal, healthy, creative, inspiring, achieving, or courageous behavior. The rapidly developing positive psychology movement, which addresses the question of optimal psychological functioning, is currently a very active area of psychological research and theorizing. Some personality theories welcome the study of the whole range of human behavior—from the difficult-to-understand mutterings of people in the dreariest mental hospitals to the daily life of the so-called average person to the achievements of the greatest scientists and artists. Many theories may focus only on health or illness, but it is possible for theoreticians to cover the whole gamut.

PERSONOLOGY OR PERSONALITY THEORY?

One issue in the field of personality is the distinction between personologists and other investigators of personality. Personologists have had distinctively different research traditions and conceptual strategies from that of psychologists who have traditionally been known as personality theorists. Henry A. Murray, an early pioneer of *personology*, defined the concept this way:

> The branch of psychology that principally concerns itself with the study of human lives and the factors that influence their course, which investigates individual differences and types of personality, may be termed “personology” instead of “the psychology of personality”. . . . (1938, p. 4)

As Robert White, one of Murray’s students and himself an eminent *personologist* explained, Henry Murray came from a tradition of medical research where multiple sources of information, detailed diagnostic interviews, and complete histories were routine procedure. What was not routine was Murray’s incorporation of these detailed, clinical methods into personality psychology. At Harvard, in the 1930s, Murray set up a Diagnostic Council of clinical psychologists and graduate students in clinical psychology. Members of the council included students and faculty who would later go on to shape the field of personality, among them Gordon Allport, Erik Erikson, Robert White, and Murray himself. The goal was to examine in detail individual life histories using every method they could devise or borrow: experimentation, observation, interviewing, personality testing, life history analysis, and direct contact of every member of the council with every subject in the research program. The work led eventually to Murray (1938) and his collaborators’ classic book *Explorations in Personality*. As White has pointed out, there has been a dearth of efforts in psychology to study the individual personality in all of its complexity and richness (see Sanford, 1985). We prefer sometimes to give two personality tests to a group of people and simply correlate the results as if that were somehow indicative of this intricate and elaborate system called personality.

Of course there are many elaborations upon this design, introducing experimental situations, different treatments, and highly sophisticated statistical procedures. But none of these entail any real personal contact with the subjects or any attempt to think of them as more than
momentarily living people. For some time I have described this type of research as studying personality without actually looking at it. (White, 1981, p. 15; italics in original)

Most of the theories we examine have a long historical development. And some of the theories reflect, sometimes to a surprising degree, the richness of the human personality in the tradition of personology. But something is lost for what is gained in detail and complexity. As we shall see, many of the theories are more literary and less scientific than we would like. Striking a balance between study of the individual and obtaining generalizable results is a very difficult art.

IMPACT OF CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Students of personality are becoming increasingly aware of the influence of culture and society on the makeup of personality. The study of multicultural dimensions of personality is only at its beginning, and we have only a beginning understanding of how personality may differ across cultures. It appears quite likely that certain givens in our Western psychological view, such as the existence of an “identity crisis,” are far from universal. One European scholar, J.H. Van Den Berg (1961), argued that the assumption of a fixed human nature was not well taken. Many areas we considered to be part of human nature, he asserted, were actually culturally determined. For example, the stage of adolescence might be viewed as a historical development or invention. Teenagers in the 1800s were considered capable of doing adult work and starting their own families. They did not go through the modern experience of adolescence, which includes a major emphasis on identity issues. Furthermore, the sheltered innocence and naïveté taken as a hallmark of childhood in the 1950s is no longer the case. Many of the theories of personality we are considering do not take into account the makeup of the culture or of the society in which they were formed, even though it is evident that cultural factors had a strong influence on the theories.

Some theorists have taken the position that there are numerous commonalities through time and cross-culturally. These theorists draw from various sources. Carl Jung looked at many cultures to find similar themes. Behaviorists sometimes focus on similarities between humans, all primates and, at times, among all vertebrates, or even invertebrates and other organisms. Evolutionary psychologists (Chapter 16), making new and, at times, controversial contributions to personality theory, see human behavior in light of underlying commonalities that have come to exist through evolutionary processes.

So, in some way, it appears that both those who argue for the variability of human behavior and the constancy of human nature have some convincing arguments and much evidence on their side. One possible answer is to see the possibility of constancy of human nature and, at the same time, differences and changes that are occurring. Behaviorists understand that conditioning is a given for everyone, but the specific behaviors that might be learned are infinitely variable. In Freud’s theory, for example, the formation of a superego is a developmental given, but the contents of a person’s superego vary according to upbringing.

It is thus possible for personality to be seen as having structural or relatively unchangeable elements as well as content elements that change. For each theory that we will examine, we may inquire how much the theory sees human nature as immutable and how much it views personality as a protean phenomenon, that is, able to take on many forms. Often this fixed-flexible dimension is seen as a polarity, but, as indicated, some theories represent both fixed and changeable aspects to personality.

The same holds true for the apparent nature-nurture dichotomy. Regardless of how extreme an advocate of nature or nurture we might be, we have to admit the
vital importance of the other side. Theories emphasizing the importance of the family environment nevertheless take for granted certain aspects of genetics and the physical environment. Those emphasizing the importance of biological variation assume that the environment is within certain limits. So, we may consider within each theoretical framework the relative impact of nature and nurture. One way of classifying theories is to consider to what extent they emphasize either nature or nurture. We may consider what aspects of nature or nurture are emphasized.

Sometimes personality theories contain within themselves contradictory elements or paradoxes that make evaluating and classifying them quite difficult. This is particularly true of theories that involve psychotherapy. That aspect of the theory used to describe the patient or client is often different from the implicit or explicit view that the theory has of the therapist. For example, psychoanalytic theory views people as largely reactive and driven by unconscious dynamics. However, it is precisely the trained psychoanalyst who has transcended this condition. Rogers’ therapist is a person who has learned to be focused on the “other,” whereas the Rogerian client is focused on his or her own feelings.

THREE MAJOR TOOLS FOR EVALUATING PERSONALITY THEORIES

To evaluate a theory of personality is not simple, and the job demands complex tools. There are so many dimensions on which to compare and to rate theories of personality that the task can be daunting. For someone coming to the field for the first time, the wealth of qualities that can be assessed may obstruct the opportunity of discovering common elements or important strengths and weaknesses.

In this book our strategy is to emphasize three fundamental dimensions to evaluate the personality theories presented. At the end of each chapter, you will find an evaluation section in which we discuss the theory at hand in terms of three qualities that give substantial information about the theory’s empirical usefulness, validity, and model of human nature. The three qualities we will emphasize as tools of analysis are:

1. Refutability: Does a theory state what it would take to prove itself wrong? Scientific theories are refutable or testable, and unscientific ones are not. In general, refutability assures some measurable degree of accuracy, usefulness, and predictive power. The most refutable theories are sometimes less helpful in understanding the complexities of individual experience and behavior. Some aspects of a theory may be testable while others are not.

2. Active human agency or passive human agency: Does the theory picture people as passive receptacles of reality? Or are they active agents who shape their own inner and outer realities? Does a theory embody a combination of both views?

3. Idiographic focus or nomothetic focus: Does the theory emphasize the uniqueness or pattern of particular qualities that an individual embodies? Or does it instead explore the general universal aspects of human behavior? Does a theory embody some interactive combination of idiographic and nomothetic focus?

Tool One: Refutability

Refutability (testability) relates to whether there is an empirical basis to the theory and to whether a given theory of personality leads to any specific predictions about behavior. Prediction and control are the usual criteria for scientific theories. A theory
Three Major Tools for Evaluating Personality Theories

may be plausible and have internal consistency and a good deal of comprehensiveness and yet not be helpful in predicting and controlling behavior.

According to the philosopher of science, Karl Popper (1959, 1963), a refutable theory must state not only what is expected to happen in certain experimental conditions, but also what is expected not to occur. In effect, the adequate scientific theory must include a statement of what observations it would take to disprove it. If such disconfirming observations can be made, the theory is refuted. This criterion of refutability guarantees that scientific theories will be stated in empirical, testable terms. The “good” theory specifies what it takes to falsify itself. The “poor” theory not only fails to specify falsification procedures, but it may be so vaguely stated that it can be compatible with any and all observations.

There is a difference between a theory having the desirable property of refutability and the actual refutation of the theory. A theory that is not refutable cannot be proven either right or wrong, whereas a theory that has been refuted is considered disproved. When a philosopher of science says that a theory is refutable, there is no implication that the theory has been or will be refuted. The only necessary quality of a refutable theory is that it be potentially refutable, that is, testable.

There is a continuing tension between the goal of refutability in personality theory and the desire to account comprehensively for the whole range of experience, thought and behavior. No theory has both comprehensively and refutably accounted for the wholeness, for the uniqueness, for the universality of human propensities, foibles, drives, abilities, and desires. Sometimes, the goal of empathy or understanding differs from the scientific emphases on refutability, prediction, and control.

Tool Two: Active or Passive Human Agency

Buss (1978) contends that each major psychological tradition attempts to solve this fundamental scientific puzzle: Does the theory have a view of active human agency or one of passive human agency? Does the person construct reality, or does reality construct the person? Put another way, each school, depending on the history to which it is reacting, asserts either that human beings are active, creative, relatively free constructors of their lives, or that people are passive, uninventive, determined receptacles of reality. In essence, each theory asserts that people are subjects or objects (Buss, 1978, p. 60; Fischer, 1977). Many theories, we will find, combine the two views, even while emphasizing one or the other. This is logical as people may be viewed as both subjects and objects, active creators and passive recipients of stimulation.

Tool Three: Idiographic or Nomothetic Focus

Gordon Allport (1937) introduced into psychology a basic distinction and a fundamental dilemma with which philosophers had struggled for decades. He borrowed the terms idiographic and nomothetic from the philosopher Wilhelm Windelband (1894) to describe the apparent conflict between two basic interests of the psychologist. As a scientist, the psychologist is interested in obtaining data and results that apply to specific groupings of people or generally to all people. Concerns such as these that focus on generalizability or even universality are called nomothetic.

The clinician proceeds to use this understanding therapeutically for his or her particular client. Such a clinician’s concerns for the individual or for the unique case are termed idiographic. The same thing holds for the psychologist helping to choose a chief executive officer for a large firm. He or she wants to help discover if one particular
individual is suited for the role. Intelligence agency psychologists work under a cover of secrecy to understand the personalities and to predict the behaviors of powerful foreign leaders. They rely on life history data, analysis of expressive behaviors, content analyses, and the accounts of many people familiar with the subject. Very little of this confidential work is published in journals.

In many cases, the idiographic and the nomothetic can be complementary, so that information derived from the study of one person may very well have aspects that are shared by other, similar people. Conversely, nomothetic “laws” that purport to be universal may be found to apply to a particular individual in a particular way. It is sometimes possible to appreciate and integrate both the nomothetic and idiographic elements in a given theory. The psychotherapy integration movement has been active in considering the possibility of actually integrating theories that are generally viewed as incompatible. The classic and contemporary theories that we consider fall at various points between the two extremes.

Allport (1961, 1968) later developed the concept of a morphogenetic approach to emphasize that uniqueness sometimes results from the pattern of general traits that an individual embodies rather than from strictly and absolutely unique qualities. The morphogenetic concept is somewhere between a nomothetic approach and the idea of a total focus on individuality.

A quotation of Allport refers to the nomothetic, the morphogenic and the idiographic aspects of personality:

“In some ways, each of us is like every other human being, in some ways we are like some other human beings, and in some ways each of us is unique.”

ADDITIONAL DIMENSIONS OF PERSONALITY THEORIES

We have already explored some questions that may be asked of any theory of personality. We will be specifically using the three tools of analysis discussed previously: active or passive human agency, refutability, idiographic or nomothetic focus. These questions, as we have seen, need not always be answered yes or no. Many “in-betweens” are known and some theories contain contradictory elements. Honest and informed scholars may arrive at different answers regarding these questions.

In this text, there is enough information for students to make some informed responses regarding additional dimensions of personality theories. (You may arrive at different conclusions than we do regarding human agency, refutability, and idiographic or nomothetic focus.) We encourage students of personality theory to think about these questions and engage in an active dialogue with the text, with other students, and with the professor in regard to the theory you are studying.

Some additional considerations: To what degree does the theory have heuristic value, in other words, how useful is the theory in enabling us to come up with new or productive ways of thinking about or dealing with a problem or topic?

- Does the theory stem from the theorist’s effort to make sense of her or his own life experience?
- Does the theory seem culturally embedded or is it generally applicable? A more refined version of this question is, “What aspects of a given theory are culturally embedded and which are more universal?”
• How does the theorist’s experience as a person of male or female gender affect the theory? To what extent does the theory lead to understanding the role of women at different times in Western culture?

• To what extent is the theory derived from study of pathology, the “normal” person, or of the exceptional individual? A related question is, “To what extent does the theory attempt to explain pathological, normal, or exceptional behavior?” Does the theory have a comprehensive view, one that includes psychopathology, normal behavior, and exceptional behavior, or does it focus only on one area?

• Does the theory help us to understand specific individuals? Does the theory help us fathom what a specific person is thinking and feeling and what his or her underlying goals and motives are? Does it lead to an understanding of how a person is experiencing reality?

• A somewhat different emphasis is the traditional nature-nurture question. Although we take the position that both are necessary factors, it is interesting to see how much weight each theory gives to each side of this debate. Does it recognize an interaction between nature and nurture?

• What, if any, life events have led the theorists themselves to view people as shaped by external forces and inner urges? What life events have led them to interpret people as largely or potentially independent steersmen of reality?

• Does the personality theory include a theory of development? What ages are covered as significant in the process? Is a stage theory included within the theory?

• A historically interesting question is to categorize the theory in one of three ways: (a) directly in the line of Freudian thinking (e.g., Anna Freud’s theory), (b) a response against major dimensions of Freudian thinking (e.g., Adler’s or Jung’s theory), or (c) entirely removed from the Freudian tradition (e.g., radical behaviorism).

• Is there a form of psychotherapy associated with the theory? If so, has the theory led to the development of a psychotherapeutic tradition, with associated institutes, organizations, journals, etc.?

• Evaluate each theory in terms of its values: Does it promote individuality, altruism, religiosity, or communal spirit? Does it seem more consistent with a liberal, conservative, socialist, or other political philosophy?

• Is the theorist European or American? How does their relation to European or American culture and history influence the personality theory?

• What is the approach of each theory toward spirituality and religion? Does it consider these areas at all? If so, indicate how much, and whether in a positive, neutral, or negative way.

• To what extent does the theorist’s religious background and identification have an impact on the theory? What, if any, appears to be the impact?

• Does the theory focus on overt behavior, thinking, emotions, or on the individual’s experience of reality?

• A more personal question: To what extent does a given theory overlap or help you understand your own life experience or the experience of those you know? Does it help you understand contemporary or historical personalities or even fictional characters?

We encourage you to add additional questions or dimensions to consider.
Chapter 1  Basic Issues: How to Approach the Study of Personality Theories

SOME WELCOMING WORDS

We are pleased to welcome you to the study of personality, the study of personality theories, and an introduction to the theorists themselves. We trust that this text will lead to a deep understanding of the topic that will stay with you. By knowing about the biographical and cultural framework in which the theories were developed as well as the thinking that went into developing the theories, we hope that you will develop a deeper than average understanding of the major personality theories. We hope that you will be able, perhaps tentatively at first, to see how these theories may help you understand your own life experience a bit better. We trust that you will become able to see your life and the lives of others from different perspectives. For some students, such understanding has led to considerable insight and personal growth. We hope it brings you the sense of satisfaction that comes from understanding life a little better.

FOR FURTHER READING

In each chapter, we will indicate a few of the most relevant and accessible resources for further study. In addition, the Wiley web site for Beneath the Mask has a more complete summary of additional reading that is relevant for the topics covered in each chapter.

For this chapter, we encourage students to access the student portion of the web site for this text and to review the various sections there. The url for this text’s web site is www.wiley.com/college/sollod

You might also try checking out some of the links there for the various theorists and their personality theories.

GLOSSARY

Active human agency: The concept that a person is actively in charge of his/her behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. In this view, the individual shapes his or her own inner and outer realities.

Evolutionary psychologists: Those who study the approach to understanding human psychology—including all of its basic areas such as learning, cognition, perception, personality and psychopathology—from the point of view of evolutionary theory.

Idiographic focus: An approach concerned with identifying the unique combination of traits and other characteristics that best accounts for the personality of a single individual. It is an in-depth analysis of one individual and the dimensions relevant to that person’s personality.

Mask metaphor: The dichotomy between appearance (the mask) and the actor (inner person). It deals with an important distinction between superficial and fundamental characteristics.

Morphogenic approach: An approach that classifies people according to the patterns of traits they display. It is midway between an idiogetic and a nomothetic approach.

Nomothetic focus: An approach that seeks to establish general laws of human functioning, that is, to understand the behavior and experience of people in general or groups of people.

Passive human agency: The individual is seen as a passive recipient of environmental forces or inner urges. The person is viewed as shaped by inner or outer forces beyond his or her control.

Personality: A pattern of relatively permanent traits, dispositions, or propensities that lend consistency to a person’s behavior and thought processes.

Personologist: A psychologist who is concerned with the life history and the coherent stream of feelings, events, traits, and situations that characterize individual personalities.

Personology: The branch of psychology that principally concerns itself with the study of individual human lives.

Pluralism: A philosophical approach that takes into account the validity of many different points of view and theoretical explanations.

Reductionism: Any theoretical approach that attempts to explain all human behavior according to a single theory.

Refutability: The idea that a theory is formulated in such a way that leads to tests either supporting or contradicting its tenets. Refutability leads to a measurable degree of accuracy and predictive power.