ORIENTATION TO PERSONALITY

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WHAT IS PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY?
What is personality? The term “personality” has many definitions, but no single meaning is accepted universally. In popular usage, personality is often equated with social skill and effectiveness. For example, we may speak of someone as having “a lot of personality” or a “popular personality,” and advertisements for self-help courses promise to give those who enroll “more personality.”

Less superficially, personality may be taken to be an individual’s most striking or dominant characteristic. In this sense, a person may be said to have a “shy personality” or a “neurotic personality,” for example, meaning that his or her dominant attribute appears to be shyness or neurotic behavior, respectively.

In personality psychology, the concept goes much beyond these meanings. It has many aspects, reflecting the richness and complexity of the phenomena to which the term refers. Here is an example of one aspect of the concept.

Stable, Coherent Individual Differences
Charles and Jane both are first-year college students taking an introductory course in economics. Their instructor returns the midterm examination in class, and both receive a D. Right after class, Charles goes up to the instructor and seems distressed and upset. He sweats as he talks, his hands tremble slightly, he speaks slowly and softly, almost whispering. His face is flushed and he appears to be on the verge of tears. He apologizes...
Different people respond differently to similar events.
(Source: Photo Alto/Getty Images)

for his “poor performance,” accusing himself bitterly: “I really have no good excuse—it was so stupid of me—I just don’t know how I could have done such a sloppy job.” He spends most of the rest of the day alone in his dormitory, cuts his classes, and writes a long entry in his diary.

Jane, on the other hand, rushes out of the lecture room at the end of class and quickly starts to joke loudly with her friend about the economics course. She makes fun of the course, comments acidly about the instructor’s lecture, and seems to pay little attention to her grade as she strides briskly to her next class. In that class, Jane participates more actively than usual and, surprising her teacher, makes a few excellent comments.

This example illustrates a well-known fact: Different people respond differently to similar events. One goal of personality psychology is to find and describe those individual differences between people that are psychologically meaningful and stable.

Though the concept of personality has to do with how an individual differs from others, it implies more. Personality refers to qualities of individuals that are relatively stable. If a person’s behavior changes from time to time, then it may not be indicative of personality. But sometimes the change in the person’s behavior can also be meaningful and tell you something more about the individual. Suppose on the second day, the course in which Jane was more upset than Charles was English Composition in which their essays were read aloud to the class. Not only was the subject matter different from economics, they also learned that their classmates thought poorly of the essays they wrote. Now, does this additional information help make sense of their behaviors? If you answered yes, think about why.

One possibility is that with the new information about what happened on the second day, one can begin to see why their behaviors changed from the first day to the second day. One can begin to form a mental picture of the kind of person who doesn’t seem upset by a bad grade in Economics but is devastated by a poor grade in English and/or her peers’ unenthusiastic response to her essay. Similarly, one may form an impression of
a person who is very upset by a poor grade in Economics but is unaffected by a bad grade in English Composition or his peers’ reactions. The information about the circumstances may make the change from day 1 to day 2 a source of insight. The change is potentially meaningful, because even though on the surface Charles and Jane’s behaviors changed, there may be coherence in the way they changed; that is, coherence in the pattern of change in an individual’s behavior may be another key component of personality.

Predicting and Understanding

The term “personality” usually implies continuity or consistency in the individual. Personality psychologists therefore ask questions like: How consistent are the observed differences between people? How would Charles and Jane respond to a D in physical education? How would each respond if they were fired from their part-time jobs? What do the differences in the reactions of the two students to their grade suggest about their other characteristics? For example, how do they also differ in their academic goals and in their past achievements and failures?

The observed differences may be meaningful indicators of individual differences in the personality of these two students. Identifying consistent, stable individual differences is an important goal for personality psychologists—and for everyday life—because it makes it possible both to describe people and to try to predict their future behavior, and so to get to know what we can expect from them.

In addition to mapping out the differences between people in terms of their characteristic ways of behaving—that is, thinking, feeling, and acting—personality psychologists try to understand what it is that underlies these differences. They ask: Why did Jane and Charles react so differently to the same event? What within each person leads to his or her distinctive ways of behaving? What must we know about each person to understand—and perhaps sometimes even predict—what he or she will think and feel and do under particular conditions? Personality psychologists ask questions of this sort as they pursue the goal of trying to explain and understand the observed psychological differences between people.

Defining Personality

The definition begins with the assumption that there are stable individual differences. It is further assumed that these differences reflect an underlying organization or structure.

In one classic and still influential working definition, the idea of organization is central to the definition. Personality psychology is “…the dynamic organization within the individual of those psychophysical systems that determine his characteristic behavior and thought” (Allport, 1961, p. 28).

As the science matures, there is a growing consensus about the findings and concepts that have stood the test of time. Consequently, a unifying conception of personality and, more modestly, at least a broadly acceptable definition, is becoming possible. A good candidate for such a definition was offered by Pervin (1996, p. 414):

**Personality is the complex organization of cognitions, affects, and behaviors that gives direction and pattern (coherence) to the person’s life. Like the body, personality consists of both structures and processes and reflects both nature (genes) and nurture (experience). In addition, personality includes the effects of the past, including memories of the past, as well as constructions of the present and future.**
Consistent with that definition, David Funder (2001, p. 198) defines the mission of personality psychology as needing to “account for the individual’s characteristic patterns of thoughts, emotion, and behavior together with the psychological mechanisms—hidden or not—behind those patterns.”

As discussed above, individual differences are always a core part of the definition of this field, but they are not all of it. Thus the terms personality psychology does not need to be limited to the study of differences between individuals in their consistent attributes. Rather, “personality psychology must also . . . study how people’s [thoughts and actions] . . . interact with—and shape reciprocally—the conditions of their lives” (Mischel, 1981b, p. 17).

This expanded view recognizes that human tendencies are a crucial part of personality. But it also recognizes the need to study the basic processes of adaptation through which people interact with and change the conditions of their lives, and how those conditions, in turn, influence them and their behavior. Personality thus includes the person’s unique patterns of coping with, and transforming, the psychological environment. This view of personality focuses not only on behavioral tendencies but also on psychological processes (such as learning, motivation, and thinking) that interact with biological-genetic processes to influence the individual’s distinctive patterns of adaptation throughout the life span.

In summary, to capture the richness of human behavior, the personality construct has to encompass the following aspects:

- Personality shows continuity, stability, and coherence.
- Personality is expressed in many ways—from overt behavior through thoughts and feelings.
- Personality is organized. In fact, when it is fragmented or disorganized it is a sign of disturbance.
- Personality is a determinant that influences how the individual relates to the social world.
- Personality is a psychological concept, but it also is assumed to link with the physical, biological characteristics of the person.

## THEORY AND LEVELS OF ANALYSIS IN PERSONALITY PSYCHOLOGY

### Early “Big Picture” Theory

Personality psychology is a relatively young science, but it has been practiced from the time that people began asking questions about human nature: Why am I anxious for no apparent reason? Who can I trust? Who do I select for a mate? Who am I?

In Western societies, since the time of the ancient Greeks, philosophers have long pondered questions about human nature and attempted classification schemes for making sense of the varieties of individual differences in important attributes and their causes. As early as 400 B.C., Hippocrates philosophized about the basic human temperaments (e.g., choleric, depressive), and their associated traits, guided by the biology of his time. For example, he thought physical qualities like yellow bile, or too much blood, might underlie the differences in temperament. He began a tradition—trait and type psychology—whose modern versions date to the start of the last century. It is a tradition that is still very much alive and well, although completely transformed in
current scientific practice, drawing extensively both on modern measurement methods and on the biology of today.

Aristotle postulated the brain to be the seat of the rational mind, or the “conscious and intellectual soul that is peculiar to man” (Singer, 1941, p. 43). This view has become a foundation of the Western view of human mind. For example, in his dualistic view of the human being as consisting of mind and body, Descartes viewed the mind as what gives us the capacities for thought and consciousness, which sets us apart from the physical world of matter. The mind “decides” and the body carries out the decision.

In the early 1900s, Sigmund Freud, living and working in Vienna as a physician, upset the rational view of human nature that characterized his time with a powerful and comprehensive theory of personality. Freud’s theory made reason secondary and instead made primary the unconscious and its often unacceptable, irrational motives and desires, thereby forever changing the view of human nature. The tradition he began also continues to influence contemporary personality psychology, but again in ways that are greatly changed from Freud’s original ideas, both by the work of his many followers and by developments in other areas of the science that made it possible to reinterpret much of his work and to revise it as needed.

From Grand Theories to Levels of Analysis

In the first half of the 20th century, personality psychology was inspired by grand theories of personality that were being developed by several “big picture” innovators: Each proposed distinctive conceptions of the nature of personality, and tried to present a comprehensive view of all of personality in all of its diverse aspects. Like Freud, many of these theorists were working in western Europe as therapists treating psychologically disturbed and distressed individuals. As practicing therapists, they used the cases of their patients as the basis for broader generalizations on the nature of personality. Consequently their ideas helped to shape clinical psychology and psychiatry as well as personality psychology. One hazard here was that because their work was based on their experience with emotionally disturbed patients, they may have focused more on the disturbed aspects of personality than on its healthier versions in less troubled people.

Broad theories like Freud’s provide an orientation and perspective that stimulates different types of research within the field and different types of real-life applications, such as clinical practice with people experiencing psychological problems. Most notably, they lead to different lines of research and to different forms of therapy or intervention designed to modify or enhance personality constructively. They also lead to different approaches to assess personality and to think about persons, including oneself, and thus matter a great deal to the image one develops of personality and individuality, and indeed of oneself as a person. As such they are valuable.

Many such grand theories sprang up in the first half of the last century, not just in the tradition of Freud, who was widely rejected in many American psychology departments, but in different directions, as discussed throughout this text. In spite of the growth of personality psychology as a field of scientific research, however, most of the grand theories of personality did not lend themselves to precise scientific testing that allowed them to be either supported or disconfirmed clearly on the basis of empirical studies (Meehl, 1990, 1997). Reasons for this range from the difficulty of specifying the theoretical premises in testable terms, to various types of experimental and statistical limitations in conducting and evaluating the test results.

But even beyond these limitations, grand theories often function more like general guidelines or orientations for studying personality and interpreting the results from a
particular perspective or framework. Thus it is difficult to firmly reject or support a given theory on the basis of empirical studies. As one pundit put it, many big theories in all areas of science generally are never really disconfirmed. They just die of loneliness as they gradually are replaced by approaches that seem more fruitful and lead to more informative new research that raises new questions and suggests new—always tentative—answers.

In the second half of the last century, after World War II, American personality psychology grew into a substantial field in its own right. It was influenced by European psychology but also developed in its own directions within the larger science of psychology. The influences in the United States came from traditions that sprang up in university psychology departments that were devoted to turning psychology away from philosophy and into science. Researchers working both with normal and disturbed populations developed and applied increasingly sophisticated scientific methods to address many central issues in personality psychology. In time, it became possible to examine important questions about personality with research evidence that accumulated at a rapid rate and pointed to exciting new directions as the science evolved.

From the 1960s to about the 1980s, the field of personality psychology was full of seemingly insoluble controversies among apparently irreconcilable broad theoretical approaches. The result was much debate and new research that helped to clarify important questions but that also created much divisiveness among alternative viewpoints.

In contrast, in the current scene there are numerous encouraging signs of integration and constructive syntheses of the insights coming from theorists and researchers that are working at different levels of analysis, addressing different aspects of personality. It is increasingly seen that each level has its legitimacy and usefulness, and each requires distinctive methods and concepts. But the findings from different levels do not necessarily conflict. On the contrary, they usually add to a fuller understanding and clarification of the whole. Each level of analysis yields many solid answers—as well as raising new questions—and each contributes to building a cumulative and coherent view of personality and human nature.

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS: ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

In this book you will learn some of the major theoretical approaches to personality that have guided thinking and research, and see how research and theory-building is done at each level of analysis. We survey some of the main concepts developed to describe and understand the important psychological differences among people, and we consider the concepts and findings that are central to diverse views of human nature.

To capture the essentials, this text is organized into the six major levels of personality study from a century of work in psychology as a science and profession. Each part of the text presents the main concepts, methods, and findings associated with that level of analysis, and each focuses attention on distinctive aspects of personality. Each level adds to the appreciation of the richness and complexity of personality. Each level also led to discoveries that have important practical and personal applications that we will examine.

In combination, the six levels provide an overview of the many complex and diverse aspects of human personality. The final part of the text shows how the levels interconnect and become integrated to give a more coherent view of the person as a whole. The organization of the text highlights how each level adds to the whole, and suggests their evolving integration. You can see this organization at a glance in Figure 1.1.
After an Introduction section that gives an overview of the data, methods, and tools of the science, Part I presents contributions from the Trait-Dispositional Level. Part II focuses on those coming from the Biological Level; followed by Part III, the Psychodynamic-Motivational Level; Part IV, the Behavioral-Conditioning Level; Part V, the Phenomenological-Humanistic Level; and Part VI, the Social Cognitive Level. Below we look at an overview of each of the levels. As Figure 1.1 suggests, the contributions from each level are cumulative and come together in the final Part VII, Integration of Levels: The Person as a Whole, which explicitly shows their interconnections. Each level asks distinctive questions, although both the questions and the levels overlap.

Almost everyone becomes interested in the science of personality because they want to understand people, and particularly themselves and those they care about, as fully as possible. In this sense, the science of personality also has a distinctly personal side: the questions that researchers ask at each level in formal scientific terms also have personal relevance. Often they are asked more informally by most people. Therefore, to make those connections explicit, the key questions pursued at each level of analysis are summarized in In Focus 1.1, and phrased in personal ways that invite you to ask them about yourself.

**The Trait-Dispositional Level**

The Trait-Dispositional Level seeks to identify the types of stable psychological qualities and behavioral dispositions that characterize different individuals and types consistently. In everyday life, people may ask themselves questions like those listed for this level in In Focus 1.1: “What am I like as a person? How am I different from other people ‘on the whole’? In what general ways are people different from each other?” Using the natural language of trait terms, people often ask and answer such questions easily, not just about themselves but about other people: He or she seems friendly, assertive, aggressive, submissive, conscientious, and so on. Examples of such traits used in current research include broad characteristics such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, and open-mindedness. Studies at this level also examine the stability and consistency of traits and types over the course of time throughout the life span.

1.7 Describe the focus of the Trait-Dispositional Level of analysis.
Some key questions at different levels of analysis phrased as questions that can be asked about oneself:

- **Trait-Dispositional Level:** What am I like as a person? How am I different from other people “on the whole”? In what general ways are people different from each other? Does what I usually do and think and feel depend mostly on myself or on the situation in which I find myself? When and how is my behavior influenced by the situation? How does my personality influence the situations I choose to be in? How does my personality influence the effects that different kinds of situations have on me?
- **Biological Level:** What in my personality comes from the genes I inherited? How is my personality a reflection of my life experiences? How does my personality reflect my basic biological predispositions? Can my experiences change my biology? For instance, does my brain change when I’m depressed? How do the same experiences affect people with different genetic predispositions? Why is my personality so different (or similar) to my siblings? How does my biology influence my pursuit of life goals? How does evolutionary theory help me understand dating and social behavior today?
- **Psychodynamic-Motivational Level:** Does what I do sometimes puzzle me? How and why? What are the real motives that drive or underlie my behavior? How can I explain irrational fears and anxieties? How do I try to protect myself psychologically against getting hurt? How much of what I do is unconscious or done without awareness? What might be some unconscious influences on my behavior? Do I have motives that make me uncomfortable? If yes, what do I try to do about that?
- **Behavioral-Conditioning Level:** How is what a person does linked to what happens to him or her when he or she does it? How are important behavior patterns, including emotions and fears, learned? How does what I do and feel depend on my earlier experiences? How can my behavior and feelings be modified by new learning experiences? Do aspects of my personality depend on the contexts in which I am? How am I different when with a good friend at school and when with my family at home for the holidays? Why?
- **Phenomenological-Humanistic Level:** Who am I really? Who do I want to become? How do I see myself? How do I see my parents? What do I feel about myself when I don’t meet my parents’ expectations? How is my real self different from the self I would ideally like to be? What is my ideal self? How am I different from my mother but similar to my father?
- **Social Cognitive Level:** What is the role in personality of what people know, think, and feel? How does what I know, think, and feel about myself and the social world influence what I do and can become? What can I do to change how I think and feel? Will that change my personality and behavior? How much of what I am and do is “automatic”? How much is open to “willpower” and self-regulation? How do willpower and self-regulation work? How can I enhance my control over my life?

This level of analysis has become one of the most vigorous and widely researched in recent years. This progress has been supported by the development of some straightforward, well-established self-report methods that are being used by researchers throughout the world. Consequently, the usefulness of trait-level analyses is being extensively investigated and has led to findings on the stability of personality over time. Work at this level is also yielding a broad taxonomy for classifying individuals with regard to major traits, providing a map on which people, groups, and even cultures can be compared. Especially in recent years, researchers at this level also have been getting answers to questions such as: Does what we do and think and feel characteristically depend mostly on the individual or on the situation? How do the two—the person and the situation—interact?
The Biological Level

An important goal of personality study at the biological level is to try to specify the role of genetic determinants and of the social environment in shaping who and what we become. The focus in much of this work in the past has been to answer the age-old question: “How much of personality reflects nature, and how much nurture—and above all, how do these two sources of influence interact in shaping our characteristics?” When you learn what is now known at this level of analysis, you will be able to answer questions like: “To what extent does my personality come from my parents and the genes I inherited from them? To what extent is my personality a reflection of my life experiences? To what extent does my personality reflect my basic biological predispositions?”

This level of analysis also addresses the fact that humans are biological beings who evolved in adaptive ways that endowed the species with biological characteristics, constraints, and possibilities. These influence human nature and the way we fight, mate, socialize, and create. The goal at this level of analysis is to examine how aspects of personality may have evolved in response to the evolutionary pressures and history that shaped our species over time. Here is an example of the kinds of problems it studies and the questions this level asks.

Consider two identical twin baby girls who were separated at birth and grew up in very different worlds. Jane was raised on a rural Iowa farm, an only child, with hard-working but unloving parents. Nahid’s life unfolded in the capital of Iran, nurtured by loving parents in a large, middle-class family. The identical twins started life with the same DNA and therefore with virtually identical brains. Suppose the twins were reunited at age 30 and tested extensively. How similar will their personalities turn out to be?

The Psychodynamic-Motivational Level

The Psychodynamic-Motivational Level probes the motivations, conflicts, and defenses, often without one’s awareness, that can help explain complex consistencies and inconsistencies in personality. Questions you might ask yourself when thinking about this level of analysis (In Focus 1.1) include: “Does what I do sometimes puzzle me? How and why? What are the real motives that drive or underlie my behavior? How can I explain irrational fears and anxieties? How do I try to protect myself against getting hurt psychologically?”

Work at this level is relevant for understanding many puzzles of personality, for example, when people turn out to be more complex and unpredictable than expected and seem to change as one knows them better. Here is an example:

Roberto was confusing his girlfriend. Before they moved in together, she thought she knew him—warm, friendly, fun, and easy to be with. Later she began to see the sadness, the inside rage, the fears, and the unpredictability. She felt she was getting more smoke than light—the longer she knew Roberto, the less she felt she really understood him, and she was beginning to lose her trust. One day, he stayed in bed most of the day. When asked what’s going on, he’d say, “I’m fine,” denying any anxiety or depression, and he seemed to mean it. Roberto was reassuring, yet she remained quite unconvinced.

Roberto’s girlfriend intuitively understood that what Roberto said and seemed to honestly believe was not necessarily the whole story and that there were other reasons that he could not acknowledge even to himself. The kind of insight needed to understand Roberto’s behavioral and emotional inconsistencies is at the heart of the psychodynamic motivational level of analysis.
Much of the work at this level has been done in psychological therapy situations, beginning with Sigmund Freud a century ago. He worked, for example, on the case of Hans, a 4-year-old child who had developed an irrational fear of going outdoors because horses might be there and he had become terrified of them even though he had never been hurt by one. Freud created a theory that used the concept of the unconscious and the child’s unacceptable sexual and aggressive wishes to explain how a fear like that could have developed.

An important key here was the discovery that certain impulses, such as a young child’s aggressive impulses toward his father, are treated by society as taboo and punished, making the child anxious. If the impulses still persist but create painful anxieties, the child may unconsciously redirect them at other objects, for example, by becoming afraid of horses, which remind him of his father who might punish him.

The Behavioral-Conditioning Level

As In Focus 1.1 indicates, work at this level of analysis has asked questions like: “How are important behavior patterns, including emotions and fears, learned? How does what I do and feel depend on my earlier experiences? How can my behavior and feelings be modified by new learning experiences?”

Consider this dilemma:

Jake was upset because he could not accept the management job he had been so eager to get when he learned that it was on the 80th floor: just the thought of riding up in the elevator terrified him—but he had never been afraid of elevators in the past.

Work at the Behavioral-Conditioning Level also tries to provide accounts of irrational behaviors that perplex the people who are tortured by them, similar to many of the same basic personality phenomena that Freud discovered at the Psychodynamic-Motivational Level. But they get there through a different route and reach different conclusions that lead to important revisions in some of the earlier ideas for dealing with such problems.

The Behavioral-Conditioning Level analyzes specific patterns of behavior that characterize individuals and the situations or conditions that seem to regulate their occurrence and strength. It studies the determinants of learning and applies learning principles to modify problematic patterns of behavior, including emotional reactions like fears. Behavioral analyses focus on a specific, problematic or otherwise important behavior—such as the stutter of a person suffering from public speaking anxieties, or one’s inability to stay concentrated on studying before exams. Then they analyze the situations or conditions that seem to control that behavior, that is, the conditions in which the stutter or the studying becomes worse or improves. Finding the conditions under which the problem improves becomes the basis for designing treatments to modify the behavior to help reduce or eliminate the problem. Behavioral analyses have helped us understand the conditions through which behaviors relevant to personality—from stutters through poor self-concepts, to troublesome behavior in interpersonal relationships—are learned and can be modified.

The results have been applied to help people overcome a variety of serious personal difficulties, ranging from common but debilitating fears, to weight problems, to learning deficits and handicaps, to increasing personal assertiveness and self-esteem. Originally this level of analysis dealt mostly with learning and conditioning based on animal work because studies of the brain were invasive and dangerous, making experiments with humans unethical. In new directions, behavioral levels of analysis have a second
life because advances in brain imaging, for example, and in the modern study of mental processes make it possible to analyze mental functions previously considered too mysterious for behavioral study with the objective methods of science.

The Phenomenological-Humanistic Level

Each person sees the world subjectively in his or her own personal ways. To understand this privately experienced side of personality, we must examine the nature of subjective experience; we have to try to see how people perceive their world. Workers at this level of analysis are genuinely interested in hearing and exploring fully the answers people give to questions (from In Focus 1.1) like these: “Who am I really? Who do I want to become? How do I see myself? How do I see my parents? What do I feel about myself when I don’t meet my parents’ expectations?”

Here is a sample of self-reported personal feelings taken from a self-description by a college student about to take a final examination:

When I think about the exam, I really feel sick... so much depends on it. I know I’m not prepared, at least not as much as I should be, but I keep hoping that I can sort of snow my way through it... I keep trying to remember some of the things he said in class, but my mind keeps wandering. God, my folks—What will they think if I don’t pass and can’t graduate? Will they have a fit? Boy! I can see their faces. Worse yet, I can hear their voices: “And with all the money we spent on your education.” Mom’s going to be hurt. She’ll let me know I let her down. She’ll be a martyr... Oh hell! What about Anne [girlfriend]? She’s counting on my graduating. We had plans. What will she think?... I’ve got to pass. I’ve just got to. What’s going to happen to me?... The whole damn world is coming apart. (extracted from Fischer, 1970, pp. 121–122)

Work at this level begins by listening closely and trying to understand the individual’s experience as he or she perceives it. The focus is on subjective experience, feelings, the personal view of the world and the self. The focus also is on people’s positive strivings and their tendencies toward growth and self-actualization.

These concerns require studying the internal or mental processes through which individuals interpret experience. A distinguished psychologist, Ulric Neisser, for example, put it this way (1967, p. 3): “Whether beautiful or ugly or just conveniently at hand, the world of experience is produced by [the person] who experiences it.” That statement, of course, does not imply that there is no “real” world out there, but just that it is the experienced world that is basic for understanding phenomena like personality and the important differences between people. Ideally, researchers at this level would like to look at the world through the eyes of the persons they are studying, to stand in that person’s shoes, to know emotionally as well as intellectually what it might be like to be that person.

For many years this level of analysis was treated with suspicion by the rest of the field, but beginning in the 1980s there has been an explosion of solid research on the self, close relationships, and identity. This work is restoring the self as an important concept in current personality psychology. It is addressing the processes through which each person develops a sense of self and identity—a conception of who one is and wants to be. This research is telling us much about how people create a life story or inner narrative that can provide life with a sense of purpose and direction (e.g., McAdams, 1995, 2005). Much work at this level also explores links between the self and personality adjustment, mental health, and positive functioning (e.g., Diener & Lucas, 2000; Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005).
Chapter 1. Orientation to Personality

The Social Cognitive Level

The focus of personality research at this level includes the person’s social knowledge of the world, and how people make sense of other people and themselves and cope as they negotiate their interpersonal lives. Questions that you might ask about yourself at this level of analysis (In Focus 1.1) are: “How does what I know, think, and feel about myself and the social world influence what I do and can become? What can I do to change how I think and feel?”

This level examines individual differences in how social knowledge is used in dealing with the world, in the construction of the self, in self-regulation, and in self-control. The specific focus is on the individual’s characteristic ways of thinking and processing information, both cognitively and emotionally, as determinants of his or her distinctive and meaningful patterns of experience and social behavior. For example:

Yolanda and Virginia, now college students, both lost their young mothers last year from breast cancer. Both women knew that their total family histories put them at high risk for having a genetic predisposition for this type of cancer early in life. At the college health service the specialist they see points out the risks of their situation in great detail. He urges that they adhere strictly to monthly breast self-examination as an important part of their health-maintenance program.

When Yolanda tries self-examination, she remembers the risks the doctor described and she imagines them vividly. Her thoughts flow from anticipating finding the lump, to thinking “I’m going to die,” to a flood of panic feelings. She thinks “what will be will be” and stops trying to self-examine. When Virginia begins, she also remembers the physician’s words but she imagines that if there is a lump she will find it early, it can be removed, and she can be successfully treated. She thinks: Above all I will have at least some control over my fate.

An important challenge at this level is to understand such internal mental and emotional processes and their links to the characteristic behavior patterns that may enduringly distinguish different individuals and types of people. The goal is not only to “get inside the head” but to understand the stable mental-emotional processes and structures that generate the diverse individual differences that are observed. Most attention in recent years is given to studying the basic psychological processes through which individuals construct, interpret, and understand their social-personal world. Questions here include: How do individuals come to deal with their worlds in the stable cognitive, emotional, and behavior patterns that characterize them? What is the “self” and how do self-concepts and perceptions about the self influence what the person thinks, feels, and becomes?

Levels of Analysis Applied to Understand Unexpected Aggression: The Texas Tower Killer

The different levels of analysis discussed throughout this text can complement each other constructively. Taken together, they increase the total understanding of personality as a whole. To illustrate, we next look at the types of questions that each level asks when confronted by the real-life puzzles of personality. In this example, you can see that the phenomena addressed by all levels interact concurrently within a personality.

The example here is the case of Charles Whitman, a University of Texas college student. Late one hot summer night, Charles Whitman killed his wife and mother. The next morning he went to a tower on the University of Texas campus and opened fire on the crowded campus below with a high-powered hunting rifle. In 90 horrifying minutes,
he killed 14 people, wounded another 24, and even managed to hit an airplane before he was killed by police. After the Whitman incident, the first question asked was a familiar one: What caused this mild-mannered young man to explode into violence?

The night before the killing, Whitman wrote the following letter, reflecting his internal subjective experiences at the time:

I don't really understand myself these days. I am supposed to be an average, reasonable, and intelligent young man. However, lately (I can't recall when it started) I have been the victim of many unusual and irrational thoughts. These thoughts constantly recur, and it requires a tremendous mental effort to concentrate on useful and progressive tasks. In March when my parents made a physical break I noticed a great deal of stress. I consulted Dr. Cochran at the University Health Center and asked him to recommend someone that I could consult with about some psychiatric disorders I felt I had. I talked with a doctor once for about two hours and tried to convey to him my fears that I felt overcome by overwhelming violent impulses. After one session I never saw the doctor again, and since then I have been fighting my mental turmoil alone, and seemingly to no avail. After my death I wish that an autopsy would be performed on me to see if there is any visible physical disorder. I have had some tremendous headaches in the past and have consumed two large bottles of Excedrin in the past three months.

The Phenomenological-Humanistic Level would focus directly on these words by Whitman and try to illuminate Whitman’s own views of what he did and why, and of what he believed was happening to him, beginning with the letter he wrote, and extending in various other directions. The concern would be to understand how his perceptions and interpretations of what was happening to him misguided him to the actions that then erupted explosively. In the effort to unscramble his confusions and
misperceptions, attention would be focused on his disturbed sense of self and his panic in trying to deal with the internal conflicts, loss of control, and feelings of fragmentation, despair, and helplessness that he was experiencing. In these efforts, work at this level and work at the psychodynamic level would become complementary, with researchers at both levels converging on some of the same questions, albeit with somewhat different concepts and methods.

Applied to the Whitman case, at the **Trait-Dispositional Level** of analysis, the main questions will be: Would Whitman be likely to have a distinctive trait profile on personality tests (to be described in the next chapter) that show, for example, high levels of angry hostility, impulsiveness, and neuroticism, with poor impulse control and little ability to handle stress? If he was not characterized by such a profile before the incident, did Whitman undergo personality change, at least as defined at the trait level? Or were there any subtle indications in his behavioral tendencies that might have allowed one to predict his actions? The profile resulting from personality tests would provide a rich description of his characteristics. Many of these might not have been evident from his previous behaviors, but might now help one to make sense of his violent outburst and the character traits with which it was consistent.

At the **Biological Level**, to understand Whitman, one would begin by considering the possible links between the brain and aggression that might underlie his ferocious outburst. To understand the Whitman case at this level, a postmortem examination was conducted to follow up on his reference to intense headaches. It revealed a highly malignant tumor in an area of the brain hypothesized to be involved in aggressive behavior. Some experts therefore suggested that Whitman’s damaged brain might have predisposed him to violent behavior. On the other hand, although many efforts have been made to locate and study areas of the brain involved in aggressive behavior, even with modern methods these relations are still poorly understood, and emerging evidence suggests that the relationship between brain areas and behavior is not simple. Certain areas of the brain may have coordinating functions in aggression, and we also know that these regions are closely regulated by other areas of the brain that process information coming in from the environment. Certain kinds of brain damage or disorders can produce violent and unpredictable behavior in humans, too. In the majority of individuals who behave aggressively, however, there is no evidence of brain damage, although the aggression is being triggered by a variety of brain mechanisms.

Nevertheless, biological and genetic factors do appear to play a more general role in aggressive behavior (Baron & Richardson, 1994; Loehlin, 1992). Identical twins, who are genetic copies of each other, are more similar in their aggressive and dominant behavior patterns than are fraternal twins, who differ genetically from one another (Plomin & Bouchard, 1991). This is the case even if the identical twins are raised in different homes with presumably different social environments (Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal, & Tellegen, 1990). But, behavior geneticists also remind us that genetic factors never operate in isolation; they always interact with environmental factors. In recent years, new discoveries about the brain, and new methods of studying its activities, have encouraged great interest and much research at this level. If Whitman were tested today, biological-level measures (such as brain scans) would allow much fuller analyses of the links between his thoughts, actions, and brain processes. Most important, as you will see later in this text (Chapter 17), recent advances in the study of brain mechanisms are giving us an increasingly clear picture of the neural mechanisms in the brain that can go wrong when people have violent outbursts of aggression (Davidson, Putnam, &
Recent work at this level, discussed in the final part of the text, also makes it clear that the biological and the psychological aspects of personality are in a continuous reciprocal influence process, each affecting the other. Consequently, contributions from the different levels of analysis again continuously enrich each other.

At the **Psychodynamic-Motivational Level**, to understand Whitman’s violence one might first focus on the “unusual and irrational thoughts” to which he referred and to his “overwhelming violent impulses.” Using the methods of psychodynamic theory (Chapters 7, 8, and 9), one seeks to understand the unconscious conflicts and struggles that underlie them. According to psychoanalytic theory, for example, human aggression is an outgrowth of the continuous conflict between strong and often unconscious impulses and the defenses developed by the ego to keep them in check. Might Whitman’s defenses against his own anger and hostility have become so rigid and extreme that he could not express his aggressive impulses even in indirect or disguised forms? A question asked at the psychodynamic level then is: Have the unreleased pressures built up to an explosion point? Work at this level assumes that the provocation that triggers unexpected destructive outburst is usually trivial. Instead, it searches to try to infer underlying conflicts and unconscious dynamics that might account for the unexpected and seemingly inexplicable change in his typical behavior.

At the **Behavioral-Conditioning Level**, the focus is on the ways in which the person’s behavior reflects and is shaped by his or her learning history and present life conditions. Applied to Charles Whitman, at this level, one would seek the answer in Whitman’s previous learning experiences and the culture in which he grew up. A question at this level would be whether there was a history of fascination and rewarding experiences with guns, as well as exposure to role models that displayed violent behaviors. One may also ask whether there was an influence by the culture or subculture and the rewards it offered for aggression in diverse forms. Perhaps the environment in which he developed had primed him to solve his problems in a violent manner, particularly when he was overwhelmed by the recent life stresses that he described in his letter.

At the **Social Cognitive Level**, how people perceive and interpret events, and the internal states and mental-emotional processes that these perceptions activate, determine how they behave. To understand what Whitman did requires understanding these mental and emotional processes that were activated in him at the time of his outburst, the specific situations he was exposed to, and his characteristic cognitive and affective dynamics that generated his extraordinary aggression. Perhaps his aggression was prompted by perceptions that he had been terribly wronged in ways that allowed him to justify his actions at least to himself. By blaming a person or group for real or imagined wrongs, people can create an image of a hated enemy fully deserving of whatever aggression is directed toward them. But why did Whitman do something so extreme that most people would not do under similar circumstances, and with equally good reasons? What was going on in Whitman’s mind that was so different and that could plausibly account for the extremeness of his aggression? What kinds of skills, self-regulatory controls, and values did he lack that could allow such behavior? What were the beliefs and expectations that led him to his actions? These are the kinds of questions that driver work at this level of analysis. While there is no way to answer such questions in hindsight, the challenge is to be able to do so—at least sometimes—in advance. In pursuing the answers, work at this level and at several of the other levels converges and each again complements the others.
Chapter 1. Orientation to Personality

Sometimes stable individuals exhibit extreme and unconventional behavior, as displayed in astronaut Lisa Marie Novak’s case (Source: JSC/NASA Media Services).

The Whitman case is an extreme example, but by no means unique. Forty years later, NASA astronaut Lisa Marie Novak, infatuated with a fellow astronaut who was involved with another woman, drove 900 miles to confront her romantic rival, an Air Force Captain. Before leaving, she packed her car with large trash bags and various weapons, including a knife and a BB Gun, and in her eagerness even wore a diaper to avoid stopping on the 10-hour drive from Houston to Orlando. She was a respected, intelligent individual in her field of expertise, and the extreme behavior in her personal life, which ultimately led to an attempted murder charge, was a shock to those who thought they knew her well. We see these complexities of personality dramatized by the media, but they also surprise us often in everyday life.

Integration of Levels: The Person as a Whole

In sum, the different levels all add their distinctive insights to understanding the total person “as a whole” and they inform each other and interact. In this text we focus first on each level separately so that each can be studied in depth, and then consider their interconnections and integration in the final part’s three chapters. When taken together, the work done at these different levels addresses every conceivable cause for any behavior or mental event central for personality. At times, to be sure, work at the different levels can also produce critical findings that contradict each other and generate real conflicts. That has happened often in the field’s history, and will continue in the future as it does in every science. But those are some of the most exciting moments in science and often set the stage for dramatic progress. In fact, in recent years, personality...
psychologists working at different levels seem to be crossing more freely over what used to be rigid boundaries. As one reviewer of ongoing work within diverse research orientations put it:

*Their research programs frequently inform one another. The complementary findings are beginning to portray a coherent (albeit incomplete) picture of personality structure and functioning. Personality psychologists have found common ground.* (Cervone, 1991, p. 373)

A more comprehensive view of the person has been emerging that seeks to incorporate many of the insights and findings from each of the diverse levels within one broader, unifying framework (e.g., Baumeister & Tice, 1996; Carver, 1996; Cervone & Mischel, 2002; Mischel & Shoda, 1998). If this trend continues, it promises to be an exciting time for the field. It indicates that personality psychology is becoming a more cumulative science in which knowledge and insights add to each other, allowing each generation of researchers to revise earlier conclusions and to build progressively on each other’s work. If so, major contributions provided by each stream of work will ultimately become more integrated, retaining those elements that stand the test of time and research as the science matures.

Boundaries are also being crossed productively between personality psychology and related fields, both at more molar, social-cultural levels of analysis (e.g., Nisbett, 1997) and at more molecular levels, particularly in cognitive neuroscience and in behavioral genetics (Lieberman, 2007; Ochser & Lieberman, 2001; Phoen, DeFries, McClearn, & Rutter, 1997; Rothbart, Posner, & Gerard, 1997; Wager, Jonides, Smith, & Nichols, 2005). It has long been the hope of personality psychology that it could some day provide an integrated view of the person (e.g., Allport, 1937) that at least begins to capture the complexity and depth of its subject matter: optimists in the field are beginning to think that day might not be too far off (Cervone & Mischel, 2002, Chap. 1).

**Practical Applications: Coping and Personal Adaptation**

To speak to why most people really want to study personality, we also look at how the discoveries made already can allow a better understanding of oneself as a person and as at least a partial architect of one’s own future. Personality theories are often applied to help improve the psychological qualities of one’s life. Even people whose problems are not severe enough to seek help from professionals still search for ways to live their lives more fully and satisfyingly. But what constitutes a fuller, more satisfying life? Given the diversity and complexity of human strengths and problems, it seems evident that simple notions of psychological adequacy in terms of “good adjustment” or “sound personality” are naive. More adequate definitions of “adaptation” and “abnormality,” of “mental health” and “deviance,” hinge on the personality theory that is used as a guide. The work discussed through the text offers distinctive notions about the nature of psychological adequacy and deviance: On closer examination, it will be seen that even these conceptions from different levels of analysis in fact have clear, common themes. But each also adds to the strategies that can be chosen to try to change troublesome behaviors and to encourage better alternatives.

Many personality psychologists are searching for useful techniques to deal with the implications of personality for human problems, such as depression, anxiety, and poor health, and to foster more advantageous patterns of coping and growth. In addition to having enormous practical and social importance, attempts to understand and change behaviors provide one of the sharpest testing grounds for ideas about personality.
These efforts include different forms of psychotherapy, drugs, and physical treatments, various special learning programs, and changes in the psychological environment to permit people to develop to their full potential. Research on these topics informs us about the usefulness and implications of different ideas about personality change in normal, well-functioning people as well as in those who are distressed. The concepts, methods, and findings relevant to personality assessment, change, and growth are discussed at many points as they apply to each of the major approaches and the levels of analysis that they guide.

**SUMMARY**

**WHAT IS PERSONALITY?**
- The term “personality” implies stable and coherent individual differences that can be described or predicted.
- In personality psychology, “personality” refers to the person’s unique patterns of coping with and transforming the psychological environment.
- Personality psychologists study how personality dispositions and psychological and biological-genetic processes influence people’s distinctive patterns of behavior.

**THEORY AND LEVELS OF ANALYSIS**
- In the first half of the last century, grand theories of personality (e.g., those of Freud) developed, introducing many lines of research and therapeutic practices.
- Work in personality psychology can now be grouped into six different major levels of analysis.
- These six levels provide an overview of the many complex and diverse aspects of human personality.
- The Trait-Dispositional Level tries to identify consistencies in the basic expressions of personality, conceptualized as stable personality characteristics.
- The Biological Level explores the biological bases of personality, including the role of heredity, the brain, and evolution.
- The Psychodynamic-Motivational Level probes the motivations, conflicts, and defenses—often unconscious—that may underlie diverse aspects of personality.
- The Behavioral-Conditioning Level analyzes specific patterns of behavior that characterize individuals and identifies the conditions that regulate their occurrence.
- The Phenomenological-Humanistic Level focuses on the inner experiences of the person and his or her way of seeing and interpreting the world.
- The Social Cognitive Level shares the focus with the Psychodynamic, Behavioral, and Phenomenological Levels, but places a greater emphasis on scientifically rigorous analysis of the patterns of thoughts and feelings and the role of situational contexts on them.
- The example of Charles Whitman shows how each level of analysis contributes to a fuller understanding of individual personality and behavior.

**TOWARD AN INTEGRATIVE SCIENCE**
- Work at each level provides basic concepts and strategies for seeking information about people and for constructively changing maladaptive behavior patterns.
- An increasingly comprehensive view of the person seems to be emerging that incorporates many of the insights and findings from each level of analysis.
- Boundaries are also being crossed between personality psychology and other related fields.

**PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**
- The findings of personality psychologists address diverse human problems, such as depression, anxiety, impulse control, and poor health.

**KEY TERMS**

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