Chapter Focus

I can be selfish, but I believe it is because I try to be perfect. Perfect in the sense I want to be an “A” student, a good mother, a loving wife, an excellent employee, a nourishing friend. My significant other thinks I try too hard to be “Mother Teresa” at times—not that that is a bad thing. But I can drive myself insane at times. I have led a hard childhood and adulthood life; therefore, I believe I am trying to make up for all the bad times. I want to be productive, good—make a difference in my world.

I'm a real jackass. I’m intelligent enough to do well in school and study genetics but have no idea when to shut up. I often am very offensive and use quite abrasive language, although I’m shy most of the time and talk to few people. I’m sarcastic, cruel, and pompous at times. Yet I’ve been told that I’m kind and sweet; this may be true, but only to those I deem worthy of speaking to with some frequency. I’m very fond of arguing and pretty much argue for fun.

This person is shy at times. They tend to open up to some people. You never know when they’re happy or sad. They never show their real feelings, and when they do it’s so hard for them. They did have a trauma experience that closed them up—where they seem to be afraid to let their real self-show. They are funny and do have a lot of fun and are fun to be around, but at times it’s hard to know if they’re really having a good time. The person is loved by a lot of people and is an extremely giving person but doesn’t like “seriousness.”

These sketches were written by people just like you: students enrolled in a course on the psychology of personality. They were writing on the very first day of class. When we, the authors of this textbook, teach this course, we commonly begin by asking class members to describe their personality and that of a friend. Students’ descriptions are insightful and richly detailed—so much so that one is forced to ask: Is the class filled with “personality theorists?”
In a sense, the answer is “yes.” We are all personality theorists. We all spend countless hours asking questions about ourselves (“Why am I depressed?” “Why do I become so anxious when I have to speak in public?”) and others (“Why are my parents so weird?” “If I introduce Maria to Mike, will they hit it off?”). In answering these questions, we develop ideas—rich, complex, sophisticated ideas—about why people act the way they do. We develop our own theories about personality.

The fact that we think so much about people raises an important point for you to consider now, at the outset of your course in personality psychology. The point is the following: You already know a lot about the subject matter of this course. You probably know more about the subject matter of this class, at its very beginning, than you do about any other course you could possibly take in college. Personality “needs no introduction.” You already know, and can describe in detail, a great many “personalities.” You have ideas about what makes people tick and how people differ from one another. You use these ideas to understand events, to predict future events, and to help your friends handle the stresses, bumps, and bruises of life. You already possess, and use, your own theory of personality.

“But”—you may be asking yourself—“if I already know so much about personality, why should I take this class? What can I learn about personality from professional personality psychologists? What are the personality theorists who are discussed in this book accomplishing that I’m not?” This chapter addresses these questions. Specifically, it introduces the field of personality psychology by considering the following three questions.

**QUESTIONS TO BE ADDRESSED IN THIS CHAPTER**

1. How do scientific theories of personality differ from the ideas about persons that you develop in your daily life?
2. Why is there more than one personality theory, and in what general ways do the theories differ?
3. What are personality psychologists trying to accomplish; in other words, what aspects of persons and individual differences are they trying to understand, and what factors are so important that they must be addressed in any personality theory?

Everybody wants to know about personality. What is my friend really like? What am I really like? Can people change their personality—and if so, how? Is there a basic human nature—and if so, what is it? Asking these questions is not hard. Providing solid, scientifically credible answers is. One group of people that tries to provide answers is psychologists in the field of personality psychology. This book introduces you to this field’s research methods, primary findings, and most important theories.

In many ways, personality psychology may seem familiar to you. The professional psychologists’ questions about persons resemble questions that you already ask. Yet there are big differences between most people’s day-to-day,
informal thinking about personality and the formal scientific theories developed by personality psychologists. The differences are not so much in the questions that are asked but in how answers are sought. Let’s begin, then, by considering some of the differences.

Think for a moment about how you develop ideas about people. You observe and interact with friends and family. You reflect on yourself. You get ideas from books, songs, movies, TV shows, and plays. Somehow, from this mix, you end up with beliefs about the nature of persons and the main differences between individuals. This mix of information is information enough unless one is trying to develop a formal theory of personality. Personality theorists are charged with studying persons scientifically. To develop a scientific theory of personality, theorists must pursue five goals that typically are not pursued in everyday, informal thinking about persons.

The five goals personality theorists pursue involve both theory (the ideas used to understand persons, their development, and the differences among them) and evidence (the scientific observations that become the database for the theory). The various theories of personality differ in how successful they are achieving each of the goals; as you read this book, then, you can evaluate each theory’s success in achieving each one of them. Let’s look at the five goals now:

**1. Observation That Is Scientific**

Good scientific theories are built on careful scientific observation. By observing people scientifically, the personality psychologist obtains systematic descriptions of universal human tendencies and differences among people. These descriptions constitute the basic data that the theories must explain.

In personality psychology, there are three key requirements for scientific observation:

1. **Study large and diverse groups of people.** Psychologists cannot base theories on observations of small numbers of people they happen to run into in their daily life. People may differ from one social or cultural setting to another, and those differences may become apparent only when people are studied within specific life contexts (Cheng et al., 2011). Psychologists thus must include diverse samples of persons in their research.

2. **Ensure that observations of people are objective.** When conducting research, one must eliminate from the research process any preconceptions or stereotypes that might bias one’s observation. Researchers also must describe their research methods in detail, so that others can replicate their methods and verify their results.

3. **Use specialized tools to study thinking processes, emotional reactions, and biological systems that contribute to personality functioning.** Psychologists observe people, just as you do. But they supplement these everyday observations with evidence obtained from specialized research tools that you’ll learn about throughout this book (especially in Chapter 2).
2. THEORY THAT IS SYSTEMATIC

Once psychologists obtain good descriptions of personality, they can formulate a personality theory. The theory is designed to provide explanation; that is, with theories, psychologists can explain what they observe in research.

When thinking about people, you and the professional psychologist have similar interests, but the psychologist has extra burdens. Before taking this class, you already have developed lots of different ideas about different people. But you do not have the burden of relating all your ideas to one another in a systematic, logical way. Suppose that one day you say “My friend is depressed because her boyfriend broke up with her” and another day you say “My mother is depressed just like her mother was; she must have inherited it.” If so, you usually do not have to relate these statements to each other; people don’t force you to spell out the relation between interpersonal factors (e.g., relationship breakup) and biological ones (inherited tendencies). But this is what the scientific community requires personality theorists to do. They must relate all their ideas to one another to create theory that is systematically organized.

3. THEORY THAT IS TESTABLE

If you tell a friend “My parents are weird,” your friend is not likely to say “Prove it!” But the scientific community says “Prove it!” any time a scientist says anything. The personality psychologist must develop theoretical ideas that can be tested by objective scientific evidence.

This is true of any science, of course. But in personality psychology, attaining the goal of a testable theory can be particularly difficult. This is because the field’s subject matter includes features of mental life—goals, dreams, wishes, impulses, conflicts, emotions, and unconscious mental defenses—that are enormously complex and inherently difficult to study scientifically.

4. THEORY THAT IS COMPREHENSIVE

Suppose you have just rented an apartment and are considering inviting in a roommate to share rent costs. When deciding who to invite, you might ask yourself a number of questions about their personalities: Are they fun loving? Conscientious? Open minded? And so forth. Yet there also are a lot of other questions that you do not have to ask: If they are fun loving, is it primarily because they inherited this quality or learned it? If they are conscientious now, are they likely to be more or less conscientious 20 years from now? If they are open minded, is it primarily because of cultural experiences through which they learned to think about the world or because of a universal human tendency toward open-minded thinking that evolved and thus is inherited?

When thinking about persons, you can be selective, asking some questions and ignoring others. But a personality theory must be comprehensive, addressing all significant questions about personality functioning, development, and individual differences.
WHY STUDY PERSONALITY?

5. APPLICATIONS: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

As the quotes from students that open this chapter make clear, people formulate insightful ideas about personality prior to studying personality psychology. Yet it is rare that people convert their personal insights into systematic applications. You may recognize that one friend’s problem is a lack of self-confidence and that another’s is an inability to open up emotionally. Yet, after this recognition, you probably don’t design therapies to boost people’s confidence in themselves or enable them to open up. Personality psychologists, however, do this. They aim not only to develop testable, systematic theory but also to convert their theoretical ideas into beneficial applications. You will learn about many such applications throughout this book.

In summary, this text introduces you to a field of study whose goal is not merely to say something interesting and insightful about people. The personality psychologists’ goals are (1) to observe people scientifically and to develop theories that are (2) systematic, (3) testable, (4) and comprehensive and (5) to convert this data-based theory into practical applications. It is these five features that distinguish the work of the personality psychologist from that of the poet, the playwright, the pop psychologist, or the student writing personality sketches on the first day of class. The poet, the playwright, and you the student may each provide insight into the human condition. But the personality psychologist is uniquely charged with developing a comprehensive, testable, systematic theory—basing that theory on scientific observation—and developing theory-based applications that benefit individuals and society.

Throughout this book, we evaluate the personality theories by judging their level of success in achieving these five goals. We do so in “critical evaluation” sections that conclude our presentation of each theory. This book’s final chapter judges how successful the field of personality psychology as a whole has been in achieving these five aims.

Why take a course in personality? One way to answer this question is to compare the material in this course with that of other courses in psychology. Consider intro psych—the typical Psych 101. Students often are disappointed with its content. The course does not seem to be about whole, intact people. Instead, one learns about parts of people (e.g., the visual system, the autonomic nervous system, long-term memory, etc.) and some of the things people do (learning, problem solving, decision making, etc.). “But where in psychology,” one reasonably might ask, “does one learn about the whole, intact person?” The answer is here, in personality psychology. Personality theorists address the total person, trying to understand how different aspects of an individual’s psychological life are related to each other, and relate also the society and culture in which the person lives (Magnusson, 2012). One reason for studying personality psychology, then, is that it addresses psychology’s most complex and interesting topic: the whole, integrated, coherent, unique individual.

Another reason for taking a course in personality psychology involves the wider intellectual world. The personality theories we will discuss have been influential not only within the confines of scientific psychology. They have
influenced society at large; they’re part of the intellectual tradition of the past century. As such, these ideas already have influenced your own thinking. Even before taking a course in personality, you might say that someone has a big ego, call a friend an “introvert,” or believe that a seemingly innocent slip of the tongue reveals something about the underlying motives of the speaker. If so, you already are using the language and ideas of personality theorists. This course, then, provides insight into some foundations for your own ways of thinking about people—ways of thinking you have acquired by living in a culture that has been influenced by the work of personality theorists.

**DELEING PERSONALITY**

The field of personality addresses three issues: (1) human universals, (2) individual differences, and (3) individual uniqueness. In studying universals, one asks: What is generally true of people; what are universal features of human nature? When studying individual differences, the main question is: How do people differ from one another; is there a set of basic human individual differences? Finally, regarding uniqueness, one asks: How can one possibly explain the uniqueness of the individual person in a scientific manner (since science often strives for general principles rather than portraits of unique entities)? Personality psychologists address dozens of more specific questions, as you will see throughout this book, but the specific issues generally can be understood in terms of overarching questions about universal properties of personality, individual differences, and the uniqueness of the individual.

Given this three-part focus, how are we to define personality? Many words have multiple meanings, and personality is no exception. Different people use the word in different ways. In fact, there are so many different meanings that one of the first textbooks in the history of the field (Allport, 1937) devoted an entire chapter merely to the question of how the word personality can be defined!

Rather than searching for a single definition of the word personality, it is useful to learn from philosophers, who teach that if one wants to know what a word means one should look at how the word is used—and, while looking, one should bear in mind that the one word may be used in a number of different ways. Different people indeed use the word personality differently. The general public often uses the term to represent a value judgment: You like someone who has a “good” personality or “lots of personality.” A boring person has “no personality.” In this casual usage, the word means something like “charisma.” Personality scientists, however, use the word differently. The book in your hands is most definitely not a book about “Charisma: Theory and Research.” The personality scientist is not trying to provide value judgments about the goodness of individuals’ personalities. He or she is trying to advance objective scientific inquiry into persons. Let’s consider, then, the scientist’s definition.

Different personality scientists employ subtly different definitions of the word personality. The differences reflect their differing theoretical beliefs. As you work through this book, you will see that some of these differences are quite important. But for now, you can think of the differences as being subtle. There is a strongly shared sense of what personality means among personality scientists. All personality psychologists use the term personality to refer to
psychological qualities that contribute to an individual's enduring and distinctive patterns of feeling, thinking, and behaving. Having stated that definition, let's elaborate on it a bit.

By “enduring,” we mean that personality characteristics are qualities that are at least somewhat consistent across time and across different situations of a person’s life. People tend to have styles of functioning that are reasonably stable. At the same time, we are aware that people do change over time and often behave differently in different situations. The introvert at one period in life turns out to be an extravert in later life. Or the introvert in some social situations becomes an extravert in other situations. The task of the personality psychologist is to describe and explain the patterns of a person’s psychological functioning, the patterns that stand out as we observe the person over time and across situations.

By “distinctive,” we mean that personality psychology addresses psychological features that differentiate people from one another. A counterexample is instructive. If someone asks you to describe your personality, you do not say, “I tend to feel sad when bad things happen but happy when good things happen.” You don’t say this because everybody tends to feel sad/happy when bad/good things happen. These psychological tendencies are not distinctive. Even when personality psychologists study universals (i.e., aspects of mental life shared by all persons), they generally use their understanding of universals as a foundation for studying differences among individuals.

By “contribute to,” we mean that the personality psychologist searches for psychological factors that causally influence, and thus at least partly explain, an individual’s distinctive and enduring tendencies. Much work in personality psychology, as in any science, is descriptive. In personality psychology, researchers may describe trends in personality development, the main individual differences in a population of people, or patterns of behavior exhibited by a particular individual in different situations. However, the personality theorist hopes to move from such description to scientific explanation by identifying psychological factors that causally contribute to the patterns of development, individual differences, and individual behavior that are observed. Thus, the task of the personality psychologist is to describe and explain people’s patterns of psychological functioning, including both patterns characteristic of all people (human nature) and those idiosyncratic to the individual.

Finally, by saying “feeling, thinking, and behaving,” we merely mean that the notion of personality is comprehensive; it refers to all aspects of persons: their mental life, their emotional experiences, and their social behavior. Personality psychologists strive to understand the whole person. Obviously, this is a difficult task that personality psychologists have set for themselves.
The *what* refers to characteristics of the person and the way these characteristics are organized in relation to one another. The *how* refers to the determinants of a person’s personality. How did genetic influences contribute to the individual’s personality? How did environmental forces and social learning experiences contribute to the person’s development? The *why* refers to causes of, and reasons behind, an individual’s behavior. Answers generally involve questions of motivation: Is the person motivated by a desire for success or a fear of failure? If a child does well in school, is it to please parents, to develop skills, to bolster self-esteem, or to compete with peers? Is a mother overprotective because she is highly affectionate, because she seeks to give her children what she missed as a child, or because she is compensating for feelings of hostility she feels toward the child? A complete theory of personality should yield a coherent set of answers to these three types of questions (what, how, and why).

To answer the *what*, *how*, and *why* questions, the personality psychologist addresses four distinct topics: (1) personality *structure*, the basic units or building blocks of personality; (2) personality *process*, the dynamic aspects of personality, including motives; (3) *growth and development*, how we develop into the unique person each of us is; and (4) *psychopathology and behavior change*, how people change and why they sometimes resist change or are unable to change. We introduce these topics now and return to them throughout this book.

**STRUCTURE**

The concept of personality *structure* refers to stable, enduring aspects of personality. People possess psychological qualities that endure from day to day and from year to year. The enduring qualities that define the individual and distinguish individuals from one another are what the psychologist refers to as personality structures. In this sense, they are comparable to parts of the body or to concepts such as atoms and molecules in physics. They represent the building blocks of personality theory.

**Units of Analysis**

As you will see throughout this text, different personality theories provide different conceptions of personality structure. A more technical way of saying this is that different theorists provide different basic variables, or different *units of analysis*, in their scientific models of personality structure. The idea of units of analysis is important for understanding how personality theories differ, so we will take a moment to illustrate the concept.

As you read this text, you may be sitting in a chair. If we ask you to describe the chair, you may say that it “weighs about 9 pounds.” Another person may say that it “probably cost about 50 dollars.” Someone else may describe the chair by saying that it is “fairly well made.” Each of these units of analysis—pounds, dollars, or degree of “well made”—tells us something about the chair.
Even though the things they tell us may be systematically related (e.g., poorly made chairs may weigh and cost less), the units of analysis clearly are distinct; if you heard someone say, “The chair probably cost about 50 dollars,” you wouldn't argue, “No, you’re crazy, it weighs about 9 pounds!”

The general idea, then, is that virtually anything can be described in more than one way—that is, through more than one unit of analysis—and each of the various descriptions may provide some valid information about the thing being described. People are no exception. The different theories of personality you will learn about in this book use different units of analysis to analyze personality structure. The resulting analyses may each be correct, in their own way. Yet each may provide different types of information about personality. Let us consider, then, some of the different units of analysis used by personality theorists.

One popular unit of analysis is that of a personality trait. The word trait generally refers to a consistent style of emotion or behavior that a person displays across a variety of situations. Someone who consistently acts in a way that we call “conscientious” might be said to have the trait of “conscientiousness.” A term that is essentially synonymous with trait is disposition; traits describe what a person tends to do, or is predisposed to do, and thus can be thought of as psychological dispositions to act in one or another manner. You probably already use trait terms to describe people. If you say that a friend is “outgoing,” “honest,” “disagreeable,” or “open minded,” you are using trait terms. There is something implicit—something that “goes without saying”—when you use these terms. If you say that a friend is, for example, “outgoing,” the term implies two things: (1) the person tends to be outgoing on average in his own daily behavior (even if, on occasion, he does not act this way), and (2) the person tends to be outgoing compared to others. If you use trait terms this way, then you are using them in the same way as most personality psychologists do.

One last feature of the units of analysis that are trait variables deserves mention. Traits usually are thought of as continuous dimensions. People have more or less of a given trait, with most people being in the middle and some people falling toward either extreme.

A different unit of analysis is type. The concept of type refers to the clustering of many different traits. For example, some researchers have explored combinations of personality traits and suggested that there are three types of persons: (1) people who respond in an adaptive, resilient manner to psychological stress, (2) people who respond in a manner that is socially inhibited or emotionally overcontrolled, and (3) people who respond in an uninhibited or undercontrolled manner (Asendorpf et al., 2002). The key notion associated with a type construct that makes it different from a trait construct is that alternative types are seen as qualitatively distinct categories. In other words, people of one versus another type do not simply have more or less of a given characteristic but have categorically different characteristics. This is most easily explained with an analogy outside of psychology. Height clearly is not a type variable. Even though we call some people “tall” and others “short,” we recognize that these words do not identify distinct categories of people. Instead, height is a continuous dimension. In contrast, biological sex is categorical. Unlike “tall” and “short,” “man” and “woman” identify qualitatively distinct categories of persons.
Many psychologists use units of analysis other than trait or type concepts. One prominent alternative is to think of personality as a system. A system is a collection of highly interconnected parts whose overall behavior reflects not only the individual parts but also their organization; colloquially, one might say that in a system “The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” Theorists who view personality as a system recognize that people have distinctive characteristics that are well described by personality trait and type constructs. However, they tend to emphasize the organization of the units relative to the units themselves. Thus, for example, they might speak of some people as having complex personality systems and others as having simple systems or of the personality systems of some people being well integrated while those of other people being in great conflict.

**Hierarchy**

In addition to the issue of units of analysis, a second consideration in the study of personality structure is that of hierarchy. Theories of personality differ in the extent to which they view the structures of personality as being organized hierarchically, with some structural units being higher in order and therefore controlling the function of other units.

In general, two things are related hierarchically if one of them is an example of the other or serves the purpose of the other (and this is controlled, or regulated, by the other). The relation between “trees” and “plants” is hierarchical in that trees are an example of the higher-level category “plants.” “Jogging” and
“getting in shape” are related hierarchically in that jogging serves the purpose of getting in shape (whereas getting in shape does not serve the purpose of jogging).

Many well-known systems are hierarchical, with higher-level subsystems regulating lower-level ones. Consider the nervous system. The brain, at the highest level, regulates the functioning of other parts of the system. Business organizations are hierarchical. Executives, at the highest levels, regulate the activities of lower-level units in the organization.

Is personality hierarchical? As you’ll see, some theories say it is. For example, theories that emphasize the role of goals in personality functioning note that people’s goals are related hierarchically. Broad, high-level goals (e.g., be successful, be a good person) regulate more specific, lower-level goals and actions (e.g., get a promotion at work, be kind to strangers). Theories that focus on personality traits also are hierarchical. A small set of basic traits organizes lower-level personality tendencies.

Other approaches, however, deemphasize the concept of hierarchy, instead arguing that personality is a fluid, flexible system in which different parts influence one another, with little rigid, fixed hierarchical structure. Consider two aspects of personality: (1) impulsive emotions and (2) plans for controlling your impulsive behavior. There may be no fixed hierarchical relation between the two. Sometimes, impulses overwhelm you and predominate in the control of behavior. Other times, your ability to plan brings your emotions under control. Neither aspect of personality consistently regulates the other or serves the purposes of the other; there is no fixed hierarchy between the two.

**PROCESS**

Just as theories can be compared in terms of how they treat personality structure, they can be compared in terms of how they treat personality processes. Personality process refers to psychological reactions that change dynamically, that is, that change over relatively brief periods of time. Even though you are the same person from one moment to the next, your thoughts, emotions, and desires often change rapidly and dramatically. One moment you are studying. The next, you are distracted by thoughts of a friend. Next, you’re hungry and getting a snack. Then, you’re feeling guilty about not studying. Next, you’re feeling guilty about overeating. This rapid, dynamic flow of motivation, emotion, and action is what personality psychologists attempt to explain when studying personality processes.

Just as in the study of personality structure, one finds that, in the study of personality processes, different theorists employ different units of analysis. The differences commonly involve different approaches to the study of motivation. Personality theorists emphasize different motivational processes. Some highlight basic biological drives. Other theorists argue that people’s anticipations of future events are more important to human motivation than are biological drive states experienced in the present. Some theorists emphasize the role of conscious thinking processes in motivation. Others believe that most important motivational processes are unconscious. To some, the motivation to enhance and improve oneself is most central to human motivation. To others, such an emphasis on “self-processes” underestimates the degree to which, in
some cultures of the world, self-enhancement is less important to motivation than is a desire to enhance one's family, community, and wider world. In their explorations of motivational processes, the personality theorists you will read about in this book are attempting to bring contemporary scientific evidence to bear on classic questions about human nature that have been discussed and debated in the world’s intellectual traditions for more than two millennia.

**GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

Personality theorists try to understand not only what individuals are like in the here and now but also how they got this way. They strive, in other words, to understand personality development.

The overall study of personality development encompasses two challenges that are relatively distinct. One is to characterize patterns of development that are experienced by most, if not all, persons. A theorist might, for example, posit that all individuals develop through a distinct series of stages or that certain motives or emotional experiences are more common at one versus another age for most persons. A second challenge is to understand developmental factors that contribute to individual differences. What factors cause individuals to develop one versus another personality style?

In the study of individual differences, a classic division of possible causes separates “nature” from “nurture.” We may be who we are because of our biological nature, that is, because of biological features that we inherited. Alternatively, our personality may reflect our nurturing, that is, our experiences in our family and in society. In a joking manner, we might say, “If you don't like your personality, who should you blame: Your parents, because of the way they nurtured you? Or your parents, because of the genes they passed on to you that shaped your biological nature?”

At different points in its history, psychological research has tended to highlight either nature or nurture as causal factors. In the middle parts of the 20th century, theorists focused heavily on environmental causes of behavior and devoted relatively little attention to genetic influences. Starting in the 1970s, investigators began systematic studies of similarity in the personalities of twins. These studies provided unambiguous evidence that inherited factors contribute to personality.

In recent years, there has been a third trend. Researchers have identified interactions between genetic and environmental factors. A critical finding is that environmental experiences activate genetic mechanisms, essentially “switching” genes on and off. Since genes code for proteins that become the structural material of the body, this means that certain types of experiences can alter the biology of the organism (Gottlieb, 1998; Rutter, 2012). This finding, in turn, implies that the traditional notion of nature versus nurture hardly makes sense. Nature and nurture—experience and biology—are not competing forces; instead, they work together, shaping the organism across its lifespan (Lewontin, 2000; Meaney, 2010).

Given the established importance of both genetic and environmental factors, the question you might now be asking yourself is: What aspects of personality are affected by what types of biological and environmental influences? This is a big question whose answers are considered throughout this textbook.
For now, though, we will provide a quick preview of some of the factors highlighted by contemporary findings in personality psychology.

**Genetic Determinants**

Genetic factors contribute strongly to personality and individual differences (Kim, 2009). Contemporary advances enable the personality psychologist to pinpoint specific paths through which genes affect personality. One main path is through **temperament**, a term that refers to biologically based emotional and behavioral tendencies that are evident in early childhood (Strelau, 1998).

Temperament characteristics that have been studied in depth are fear reactions and inhibited behavior (Fox et al., 2005). People differ considerably in the degree to which they respond fearfully, especially when encountering unfamiliar, novel situations (e.g., a social setting with many strangers). Genes contribute to individual differences in brain systems that are involved in this fear response. These biological differences, in turn, produce psychological differences in behavior and emotion (Fox & Reeb-Sutherland, 2010). Since genetic factors contribute to the development of the brain, in this work the psychologist can identify a precise link from genes to biological systems to temperament, as expressed in emotion and behavior. An interesting feature of this work is that it points to the impact not only of genes but also of the environment. Some evidence indicates that temperamentally shy children change, becoming less shy, when they experience day care in which they encounter large numbers of other children every day (Schmidt & Fox, 2002), though data on this point are somewhat mixed (Kagan, 2011).

Genetic bases of personality also are explored by evolutionary psychologists, that is, psychologists who study the evolutionary basis of psychological characteristics (Buss & Hawley, 2011). Evolutionary psychologists propose that contemporary humans possess psychological tendencies that are a product of our evolutionary past. People are predisposed to engage in certain types of behavior because those behaviors contributed to survival and reproductive success over the course of human evolution. An evolutionary analysis of genetic influences differs fundamentally from the analyses reviewed in the two preceding paragraphs. In an evolutionary analysis, investigators are not interested in genetic bases of individual **differences**. Instead, they are searching for the genetic basis of human **universals**, that is, psychological features that all people have in common. Most of our genes are shared. Even the so-called racial differences involve merely superficial differences in features such as skin tone; the basic structure of the human brain is universal (Cavalli-Sforza & Cavalli-Sforza, 1995). The evolutionary psychologist suggests, then, that we all inherit psychological mechanisms that predispose us to respond to the environment in ways that proved successful over the course of evolution. Such responses might come into play when we attract members of the opposite sex, take care of children, act in an altruistic manner toward members of our social group, or respond emotionally to objects and events. Research on emotions suggests that a number of basic emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, joy, disgust, fear) are experienced, and expressed in facial expressions, in a similar manner across cultures (Ekman, 1993, 1994; Izard, 1994), as would be expected if these emotions were part of our evolutionary heritage. Yet again, however, some
variations across cultures also are found (Jack et al., 2011), which suggests a role for environmental experience, too.

Environmental Determinants

Even the most biologically oriented of psychologists recognizes that personality is shaped, to a significant degree, by the environment. If we did not grow up in a society with other people, we would not even be persons in the way in which that term commonly is understood. Our concept of self, our goals in life, and the values that guide us develop in a social world. Some environmental determinants make people similar to one another, whereas others contribute to individual differences and individual uniqueness. The environmental determinants that have proven to be important in the study of personality development include culture, social class, family, and peers.

Culture  Significant among the environmental determinants of personality are experiences individuals have as a result of membership in a particular culture: “Culture is a key determinant of what it means to be a person” (Benet-Martinez & Oishi, 2008, p. 543). Each culture has its own institutionalized and sanctioned patterns of learned behaviors, rituals, and beliefs. These cultural practices, which in turn often reflect long-standing religious and philosophical beliefs, provide people with answers to significant questions about the nature of the self, one’s role in one’s community, and the values and principles that are most important in life. As a result, members of a culture may share personality characteristics.
Since the beginning of scientific psychology, writers have recognized that the human brain, like the rest of human anatomy, is a product of evolution. James's (1890) Principles of Psychology, one of the first great textbooks in the field, concluded with a chapter that explained how Charles Darwin's theory of evolution was relevant to the understanding of mental structures.

The central idea in relating biological principles of evolution to psychological analyses of mind and personality is that, at birth, the human mind is not a blank slate. It is not the case that the mind, at birth, lacks any mental contents or inherent tendencies. Instead, thanks to processes of natural selection over the course of evolution, people are born with inherent tendencies and abilities. Neural mechanisms that produce psychological tendencies that proved adaptive over the course of evolution have become an inherited part of our mental makeup.

In the contemporary field, no personality scientist doubts that our personalities are, in part, a product of evolution. Yet major questions remain. How big a part of mental life is explained by evolutionary ancestry (as opposed to experiences that we have after we are born)? Has evolution given us a fixed set of tendencies that proved useful in the evolutionary past, or has it given us a brain that adapts flexibly to the demands of the present?

In recent years, these issues have been of interest not only to psychologists and other scientists but also to the public at large. In part, this is due to the writings of Steven Pinker, a psychologist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In his book, The Blank Slate (Pinker, 2002), Pinker suggests that society has been too slow to accept the notion that people are a product of their species' evolutionary past. People find it pleasant to think that psychological qualities can be changed through new experiences. We hope, for example, that improved parenting, better education, and more enlightened social policies can create a kinder and gentler world—a world with less prejudice and aggression and more tolerance and peace. But, as Pinker points out, there might be features of human psychology that are enormously difficult to change because they are the products of evolution. Those psychological features that proved adaptive over the course of our evolutionary history may be fixed, hardwired features of the current human mind. Recognizing the influence of evolutionary factors on the shaping of the mind is then key to understanding the basic character of human nature. Such an understanding, in turn, may be critical to devising humane, effective social policies and to recognizing when social policies will not work.

Pinker's analyses currently are a point of controversy in the field of psychology and beyond. Some feel that Pinker's evolutionary framework explains only very limited aspects of the human experience. For example, in reviewing Pinker's book in the magazine The New Yorker, the scholar Menand (2002) notes that much of human activity seems completely disconnected from the actions and events of the evolutionary past. Writers also fault evolutionary psychology for being based more on speculation than on established fact. A biologist has judged that the evidence on which the arguments of evolutionary psychology are based is “surprisingly unrigorous. Too often, data are skimpy, alternative hypotheses are neglected, and the entire
Interestingly, people often may be unaware of shared cultural tendencies because they take them for granted. For example, if you live in North America or western Europe, you may not appreciate the extent to which your conception of yourself and your goals in life are shaped by living in a culture that strongly values individual rights and in which individuals compete with one another in an economic marketplace to improve their financial and social status. Since everyone in these regions of the world experiences these cultural features, we take them for granted and may assume that they are universal. Yet much evidence indicates that people in other regions of the world experience different cultural features. Asian cultures appear to place a greater value on a person's contribution to his or her community rather than on individualism and personal gain (Nisbett et al., 2001). In fact, even within the Western world, cultural beliefs about the individual's role in society have changed from one historical period to another. The idea that individuals compete against one another in an economic marketplace in order to improve their position in life is a feature of contemporary Western societies, but it was not evident in these same societies in the Middle Ages (Heilbroner, 1986). American college students, on average, became more self-focused between the 1960s and 1990s, and American women became more assertive and dominant from 1968 to 1993 (Benet-Martinez & Oishi, 2008).

Culture, then, may exert an influence on personality that is subtle yet pervasive. The culture we live in defines our needs and our means of satisfying them, our experiences of different emotions and how we express what we are feeling, our relationships with others and with ourselves, what we think is funny or sad, how we cope with life and death, and what we view as healthy or sick (Markus & Kitayama, 2011).

**Social Class** Although certain patterns of behavior develop as a result of membership in a culture, others may develop as a result of membership in a particular social class within a given culture. Many aspects of an individual's personality can only be understood by reference to the group to which that person belongs.
One’s social group—whether lower class, upper class, working class, or professional—is of particular importance. Social class factors help determine the status of individuals, the roles they perform, the duties they are bound by, and the privileges they enjoy. These factors influence how individuals see themselves and how they perceive members of other social classes, as well as how they earn and spend money. Research indicates that socioeconomic status influences the cognitive and emotional development of the individual (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Like cultural factors, then, social class factors influence people’s capacities and tendencies and shape the ways people define situations and respond to them.

**Family** Beyond the similarities determined by environmental factors such as membership in the same culture or social class, environmental factors lead to considerable variation in the personality functioning of members of a single culture or class. One of the most important environmental factors is the influence of the family (Park, 2004; Pomerantz & Thompson, 2008). Parents may be warm and loving or hostile and rejecting or overprotective and possessive or aware of their children’s need for freedom and autonomy. Each pattern of parental behavior affects the personality development of the child. Parents influence their children’s behavior in at least three important ways:

1. Through their own behavior, parents present situations that elicit certain behavior in children (e.g., frustration leads to aggression).
2. Parents serve as role models for identification.
3. Parents selectively reward behaviors.

At first, we may think of family practices as an influence that makes family members similar to one another. Yet family practices also can create differences within a family. Consider differences between male and female family members. Historically, in many societies, male children have received family privileges and opportunities that were unavailable to female children. These differences in how families have treated boys and girls surely did not make boys and girls similar to one another; rather, they contributed to differences in male and female development. In addition to gender, other family practices that may produce differences between family members involve birth order. Parents sometimes express subtle preferences toward firstborn children (Keller & Zach, 2002), who tend to be more achievement oriented and conscientious than later-born siblings (Paulhus et al., 1999).

**Peers** What environmental features outside of family life are important to personality development? The child’s experiences with members of his or her peer group are one feature. Indeed, some psychologists view peer influences as more important to personality development than family experiences (Harris, 1995). Perhaps “the answer to the question ‘Why are children from the same family so different from one another?’ (Plomin & Daniels, 1987) is, because they have different experiences outside the home and because their experiences inside the home do not make them more alike” (Harris, 1995, p. 481). Peer groups socialize the individual into acceptance of new rules of behavior. These experiences may affect personality in an enduring manner. For example, children who
experience low-quality friendships that involve a lot of arguing and conflict tend to develop disagreeable, antagonistic styles of behavior (Berndt, 2002).

**PSYCHOPATHOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE**

Constructing a personality theory may strike you as an ivory tower activity, that is, an abstract intellectual exercise that fails to relate to the important concerns of everyday life. Yet personality theories are potentially of great practical importance. People often face complicated psychological problems: They are depressed and lonely, a close friend is addicted to drugs, they are anxious about sexual relations, or frequent arguments threaten the stability of a romantic relationship. To solve such problems, one requires some sort of conceptual framework that specifies causes of the problem and factors that might bring about change. In other words, one needs a personality theory.

Historically, the practical problems that have been most important to the development of personality theories have involved psychopathology. Many of the theorists discussed in this book were also therapists. They began their careers by trying to solve practical problems they faced when trying to help their clients. Their theories were, in part, an attempt to systematize the lessons about human nature that they learned by working on practical problems in therapy.

Although not all personality theories had clinical origins, for any theory, a crucial bottom line for evaluating the theoretical approach is to ask whether its ideas are of practical benefit to individuals and to society at large.

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**PHILOSOPHICAL VIEW OF THE PERSON**

Personality theorists do not confine themselves to narrow questions about human behavior. Instead, they boldly tackle the big, broad question: What is the basic nature of human nature? Personality theorists, in other words, provide philosophical views about the basic nature of human beings. One critical consideration when evaluating a theory, then, is the overall view of the person that it provides.

Personality theories embrace strikingly different views of the essential qualities of human nature. Some incorporate a view in which people seem to be rational actors. People reason about the world, weigh the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action, and behave based on these rational calculations. In this view, individual differences primarily reflect differences in the thought processes that go into these calculations.

Other perspectives recognize that humans are animals. The human organism, in this view, is driven primarily by irrational, animalistic forces. Rational
thought processes are seen as relatively weak components of personality, compared to powerful animalistic drives.

During the later decades of the 20th century, a popular metaphor for understanding persons was the computer metaphor. People were seen as information processors who stored and manipulated symbolic representations, much as a computer processes and stores information. Since people move around in the world, some argued that robots, rather than computers, provide a closer analogy to human nature.

One should recognize that different views of human nature have arisen in different sociohistorical circumstances. Proponents of different points of view have had different life experiences and have been influenced by different historical traditions. Thus, beyond scientific evidence and fact, theories of personality are influenced by personal factors, by the spirit of the time, and by philosophical assumptions characteristic of members of a given culture.

**INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DETERMINANTS OF BEHAVIOR**

Is human behavior determined by processes inside the person or by external causes? The issues here concern the relationship between, and the relative importance of, internal and external determinants. All theories of personality recognize that factors inside the organism and events in the surrounding environment are important in determining behavior. However, the theories differ in the level of importance given to internal and external determinants.

Consider the differences in view of two of the most influential psychologists of the 20th century: Sigmund Freud and B. F. Skinner. According to Freud, we are controlled by internal forces: unconscious impulses and emotions that are buried deep in our unconscious minds. According to Skinner, we are controlled by external forces: environmental rewards and punishments that govern our actions. “A person does not act upon the world, the world acts upon him,” Skinner (1971, p. 211) writes.

Freud’s and Skinner’s views are extreme in the light of contemporary scientific knowledge. Virtually all personality psychologists today acknowledge both external and internal determinants of human action. Nonetheless, contemporary theories continue to differ markedly in the degree to which they emphasize one versus the other factor. These differences become apparent when one examines the basic variables—or, as we called them earlier, the basic units of analysis—of a given theory. Consider two perspectives you will read about in later chapters. In trait theories of personality, the basic units of analysis refer to structures in the person that purportedly are inherited and produce highly generalized patterns of behavior (McCrae & Costa, 2008). In social-cognitive theories of personality, the basic units of analysis are knowledge structures and thinking processes that are acquired through interaction with the social and cultural environment (Bandura, 1999; Mischel & Shoda, 2008). As you can infer from their basic units, these theories differentially emphasize internal and external determinants of personality.

**CONSISTENCY ACROSS SITUATIONS AND OVER TIME**

How consistent is personality from situation to situation? To what extent are you “the same person” when with friends as you are with your parents? Or
when you are at a party versus present during a classroom discussion? And how consistent is personality across time? How similar is your personality now to what it was when you were a child? And how similar will it be 20 years from now?

Answering these questions is more difficult than it may appear. In part, this is because one has to decide on what counts as an example of personality consistency versus inconsistency. Consider a simple example. Suppose that you have two supervisors at a job, one male and one female, and that you tend to act in an agreeable manner toward one supervisor and disagreeably toward the other. Are you being inconsistent in your personality? If one thinks that a basic feature of personality is agreeableness, then the answer is yes. But suppose this situation were analyzed by a psychologist who adheres to psychoanalytic theory, which suggests that (1) people you encounter in your adult life may symbolically represent parental figures and (2) a basic personality dynamic involves attraction toward one’s opposite-sex parent and rivalry toward the same-sex parent—something called an “Oedipal complex.” From this view, you may be acting in a very consistent manner. The different job supervisors may symbolically represent different parental figures, and you may be consistently reenacting Oedipal motives that cause you to act in a different manner toward one versus the other person.

Even if people agree on what counts as consistency, they may disagree about the factors that cause personality to be consistent. Consider consistency over time. It unquestionably is the case that individual differences are stable, to a significant degree, over long periods of time (Fraley, 2002; Roberts & Del Vecchio, 2000). If you are more extraverted than your friends today, you are quite likely to be more extraverted than these same people 20 years from now. But why? One possibility is that the core structures of personality are inherited and that they change little across the course of life. Another possibility, however, is that the environment plays a critical role in fostering consistency. Exposure to the same family members, friends, educational systems, and social circumstances over long periods of time may contribute to personality consistency over time (Lewis, 2002).

No personality theorist thinks that you will fall asleep an introvert and wake up the next morning an extravert. Yet the field’s theoretical frameworks do provide different views on the nature of personality consistency and change and on people’s capacity to vary their personality functioning across time and place. To some theorists, variation in behavior is a sign of inconsistency in personality. To others, it may reflect a consistent personal capacity to adapt one’s behavior to the different requirements of different social situations (Mischel, 2004).

**THE UNITY OF EXPERIENCE AND ACTION AND THE CONCEPT OF SELF**

Our psychological experiences generally have an integrated, or coherent, quality to them (Cervone & Shoda, 1999b). Our actions are patterned and organized, rather than random and chaotic. As we move from place to place, we retain a stable sense of ourselves, our past, and our goals for the future. There is a unity to our experiences and action.
Although we take it for granted that our experiences are unified, in some sense, this fact is quite surprising. The brain contains a large number of information-processing systems, many of which function at the same time, in partial isolation from one another (Pinker, 1997). If we examine the contents of our own conscious experiences, we will find that most of our thoughts are fleeting. It is hard to keep any one idea in mind for long periods. Seemingly random ideas pop into our heads. Nonetheless, we rarely experience the world as chaotic or our lives as disjointed. Why?

There are two types of answers to this question. One is that the multiple components of the mind function as a complex system. The parts are interconnected, and the patterns of interconnection enable the multipart system to function in a smooth, coherent manner. Computer simulations of personality functioning (Nowak et al., 2002), as well as neuroscientific investigations of the reciprocal links among brain regions (Sporns, 2010; Tononi & Edelman, 1998), are beginning to shed light on how the mind manages to produce coherence in experience and action.

The second type of answer involves the concept of the self. Although we may experience a potentially bewildering diversity of life events, we do experience them from a consistent perspective, that of ourselves (Harré, 1998). People construct coherent autobiographical memories, which contribute to coherence in our understanding of who we are (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). The concept of the self, then, has proven valuable in accounting for the unity of experience (Baumeister, 1999; Robins et al., 1999; Robins et al., 2008).
VARYING STATES OF AWARENESS AND THE CONCEPT OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

Are we aware of the contents of our mental life? Or do most mental activities occur outside of awareness, or unconsciously?

On the one hand, much of the brain’s activities unquestionably occur outside of awareness. Consider what is happening as you read this book. Your brain is engaging in large numbers of functions ranging from the monitoring of your internal physiological state to the deciphering of the marks of ink that constitute the words on this page. All this occurs without your conscious attention. You do not consciously have to think to yourself “I wonder if these squiggles of ink form words” or “Maybe I should check to see if sufficient amounts of oxygen are getting to my bodily organs.” These functions are executed automatically. But these functions are not the ones of main interest to the personality psychologist.

Personality scientists ask whether significant aspects of personality functioning—motivation and emotions—occur outside of awareness. If there is evidence that they do, the personality scientist tries to conceptualize the mental systems that give rise to conscious and unconscious processes (Kihlstrom, 2008; Pervin, 2003). The fact that some brain functions occur outside of awareness does not imply that the most significant personality processes occur without our awareness. People engage in much self-reflection. They are particularly likely to reflect on themselves when they face life circumstances of great importance, where the decisions that are made (e.g., whether and where to attend college, whether to marry a certain person, whether to have children, what profession to pursue) have major long-term consequences. In these critical circumstances, conscious processes are influential. Thus, many personality psychologists study conscious self-reflection even while recognizing that numerous aspects of mental life occur outside of awareness.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE ON BEHAVIOR

Are we prisoners of our past? Or is our personality shaped by present events and personal aspirations for the future? Theorists agree that behavior can be influenced only by factors operating in the present; a basic principle of causality is that presently active processes are the causes of events. In this sense, only the present is important in understanding behavior. But the present can be influenced by experiences in the remote past or in the recent past. Similarly, what one is thinking about in the present can be influenced by thoughts about the immediate future or the distant future. People vary in the extent to which they worry about the past and the future. And personality theorists differ in their concern with the past and the future as determinants of behavior in the present. As you will see in the chapters ahead, some theorists suggest that we are primarily prisoners of our past. Psychoanalytic theory posits that personality structures are formed through experiences in childhood and that the personality dynamics established then persist throughout the life course. Others are harshly critical of this psychoanalytic conclusion. Personal construct theory (Chapter 11) and social-cognitive theory (Chapters 12–13) suggest that people have the capacity to change their own personal capabilities and tendencies and to explore the social and psychological systems that give people this lifelong capacity for personal agency (Bandura, 2006).
CAN WE HAVE A SCIENCE OF PERSONALITY? WHAT KIND OF A SCIENCE CAN IT BE?

A final issue of importance concerns the type of theory of personality that one reasonably can pursue. We have taken it for granted thus far that one can craft a science of personality, in other words, that the methods of science can inform the nature of persons. This assumption seems to be a safe one. People are objects in a physical universe. They consist of biological systems comprised of physical and chemical parts. Science thus should be able to tell us something about them.

Nonetheless, one can reasonably question the forms of scientific analysis that can be applied to the understanding of persons. Much of the progress of science has involved analyses that are reductionistic. A system is understood by reducing a complex whole to its simpler parts and showing how the parts give rise to the functioning of the whole.

Such analyses work wonderfully when applied to physical systems. A biological system, for example, can be understood in terms of the biochemistry of its parts. The chemistry, in turn, can be understood in terms of the underlying physics of the chemical components. But personality is not merely a physical system. People construct, and respond to, meaning. We strive to understand ourselves and what the events that we witness mean for us. There is no guarantee that the traditional scientific procedures of breaking a system into constituent parts will be sufficient to understand these processes of meaning construction. Indeed, numerous scholars have suggested that they may not and have warned psychologists against importing the methods of the physical sciences into the study of human meaning systems (Geertz, 2000). To such commentators, the idea that people have “parts” is “at best a metaphor” (Harré, 1998, p. 15). The risk of adopting this metaphor is that, to use a cliche, “the whole may be greater than the sum of the parts.”

By analogy, consider an analysis of a great work of art, such as da Vinci's Mona Lisa. In principle, one could analyze its parts: There's paint of one color over here, paint of some other color there, and so on. But this sort of analysis will not enable one to understand the greatness of the painting. This requires viewing the work as a whole and understanding the historical context in which it was made. By analogy, a listing of the psychological parts of an actual person may, in principle, fail to portray the whole individual and the developmental processes that contributed to his or her uniqueness. A question to ask yourself when reading this textbook, then, is whether the personality theorists are as successful as was da Vinci at providing holistic psychological portraits of complex individuals.

As we have noted, a unique feature of the scientific field of personality psychology is that it contains more than one guiding theory. Multiple theories of personality inform us about human nature and individual differences. A natural question, then, is how to evaluate the theories, one versus the other. How can one judge the strengths and limitations of the various theories? What criteria should be used to evaluate them?

To evaluate something, one generally asks what it is supposed to do. One then can judge how well it is doing it. A more formal way to say this is that one asks about the functions that the entity is supposed to serve. One then can
evaluate the degree to which it is carrying out those functions. Like all scientific theories, theories of personality can serve three key functions: They can (1) organize existing information, (2) generate new knowledge about important issues, and (3) identify entirely new issues that are deserving of study.

The first of these functions is obvious. Research provides an array of facts about personality, personality development, and individual differences. Rather than merely listing these facts in an unordered manner, it would be useful to organize them systematically. A logical, systematic ordering of facts would enable one to keep track of what scientists know about personality. This can make it easier to put that knowledge to use.

The second function is somewhat less obvious. In any field of study, there are issues—involving both basic science questions and applications of scientific knowledge—that everyone in the field recognizes as important. A good theory fosters new knowledge about these issues. It is generative. The theory helps people to generate new knowledge about the topics they recognize as important to their field. In biology, Darwin’s theory of natural selection was useful not only because it organized known facts about the world’s flora and fauna. Its additional value is that it opened new pathways of knowledge about biology. In personality psychology, some theories have proven to be highly generative. They have prompted researchers who are familiar with the theory to use its ideas to generate new knowledge about personality.

The third function is of particular interest to both the personality scientist and the public at large. A personality theory may identify entirely new areas of study—areas that people might never have known about were it not for the theory. Psychodynamic theory opened the door to psychological issues that were utterly novel to most people: the possibility that our most important thoughts and emotions are unconscious and the possibility that events early in childhood determine our adult personality characteristics. Other theories also have this quality. Evolutionary psychology (reviewed in Chapter 9) makes the novel suggestion that contemporary patterns of thought and behavior are not learned in contemporary society but, instead, are inherited from our ancestral past. Behaviorism (Chapter 10) raises the possibility that actions that we attribute to our free choice, or free will, are ultimately caused by the environment. These theories’ fascinating and sometimes radical hypotheses about human nature have prompted much valuable new investigation into human nature.

In sum, you can evaluate the theories you will learn about in this text by gauging their success in (1) organizing information, (2) generating knowledge, and (3) identifying important issues to study.
set of scientific goals that go beyond one’s intuitive thinking about personality. They must address a broad set of what, how, and why questions about personality structure, processes, development, and change. They must consider determinants of personality ranging from the molecular to the sociocultural, and conceptual issues ranging from the philosophical view of persons that is embedded in their theory to the question of whether one can have a scientific theory of persons in the first place.

Does any one person do this ideally? Is there a single theory that is so comprehensive in its scope, so consistent with scientific evidence, and so uniquely able to foster new knowledge that it is accepted universally? The answer, quite simply, is no. There exist different theoretical frameworks. Each has its strengths, and each its limitations. More important, each has its unique virtues; in other words, each of a variety of theories provides some unique insights into human nature. It is for this reason that this textbook is organized around personality theories—plural.

**THE PERSONALITY THEORIES: A PRELIMINARY SKETCH**

What theoretical frameworks have had the biggest impact on the field? This book will introduce you to six theoretical approaches. We provide a brief sketch of these approaches here, so that you can get a sense of the terrain ahead.

We begin with psychodynamic theory (Chapters 3 and 4), the approach pioneered by Freud. Psychodynamic theory views the mind as an energy system; the basic biological energies of the body reside, in part, in the mind. Mental energies, then, are directed to the service of basic bodily needs. However, people generally cannot gratify sexual and other bodily desires whenever they wish. Instead, the drive to gratify bodily needs often conflicts with the dictates of society. Behavior, then, reflects a conflict between biological desires on the one hand and social constraints on the other. In psychoanalysis, the mind is said to contain different systems that serve different functions: satisfying bodily needs, representing social norms and rules, and striking a strategic balancing between biological drives and social constraints. An additional defining feature of psychodynamic theory is that much of this mental activity is said to occur outside of one’s conscious awareness. We are not aware of the drives that underlie our emotions and behavior; they are unconscious.

Phenomenological theories, reviewed next (Chapters 5 and 6), contrast starkly with the psychodynamic view. Phenomenological theories are less concerned with unconscious process and more concerned with people’s conscious experience of the world around them, that is, their phenomenological experience. Phenomenological theorists recognize that people have biologically based motives, yet they believe that people also possess “higher” motives involving personal growth and self-fulfillment and that these motives are more important to personal well-being than are the animalistic drives highlighted by Freud. Finally, compared to psychodynamic approaches, phenomenological theory places much greater emphasis on the self. The development of a stable and coherent understanding of oneself is seen as key to psychological health.

Trait approaches to personality, reviewed in Chapters 7 and 8, differ strikingly from both of the previous formulations. The differences reflect not only different views about the nature of personality but also different scientific
beliefs about the best way of building a personality theory. Most trait theorists believe that, to construct a theory of personality, one must begin by solving two scientific problems: (1) determining which individual differences are most important to measure and (2) developing a reliable measure of these individual differences. Once these problems are solved, one would be able to measure the most important individual differences in personality, and these measurements could serve as a basis for constructing a comprehensive theory of persons. A main development in the late-20th-century history of the field is that many personality psychologists came to conclude that these problems had, in fact, been solved. Much consensus has been achieved on the question of what individual differences are most important and on how they can be measured.

Chapter 9 addresses one of the most exciting aspects of contemporary personality science, namely, research on the biological foundations of personality. This includes findings regarding the genetic bases of personality traits, as well as work revealing the brain systems that underlie individual differences. In this chapter, we devote coverage not only to trait theories but also to evolutionary psychology. Evolutionary psychologists explain contemporary patterns of social behavior in terms of mental mechanisms that are a product of our evolutionary past.

Chapter 10 introduces the ideas of behaviorism, which represent a learning approach to personality. In behavioral theories, behavior is seen as an adaptation to rewards and punishments experienced in the environment. Since different people experience different patterns of reward in different settings, they naturally developed different styles of behavior. Basic learning processes, then, are said to account for the stylistic variations in behavior that we call "personality." Behaviorism presents a profound challenge to the theories presented previously. To the behaviorist, the units of analysis of the previous theories—the psychodynamic theorist’s “unconscious forces,” the “self” of phenomenological theories, and personality “traits”—are not causes of behavior. They merely are descriptions of patterns of thinking, emotion, and behavior that ultimately are caused by the environment that, according to the behaviorist, shapes our behavior.

Chapter 11 introduces a markedly different theoretical approach, that of personal construct theory. Personal construct theory addresses people’s capacity to interpret the world. Unlike the behaviorist, who is most concerned with how the environment determines our experiences, the personal construct theorist studies the subjective ideas, or constructs, that people use to interpret the environment. One person may view the college environment as challenging, another as boring; one person may view dating circumstances as romantic, another as sexually threatening. Personal construct theorists explore the possibility that most individual differences in personality functioning stem from the different constructs that people use to interpret their world.

The final theoretical perspective is that of social-cognitive theory (Chapters 12 and 13). In some respect, social-cognitive theory is similar to the personal construct approach; social-cognitive theorists study personality by analyzing the thinking processes that come into play as people interpret their world. However, the social-cognitive perspective expands upon personal construct theory in at least two important ways: First, as suggested by its name, social-cognitive theory explores in detail the social settings in which people acquire knowledge, skills, and beliefs. Personality develops through back-and-forth
influences, or *reciprocal interactions*, between people and the settings (i.e., the family, interpersonal, social, and cultural settings) of their lives. Second, social-cognitive theory devotes much attention to questions of *self-regulation*, which refers to the psychological processes through which people set goals for themselves, control their emotional impulses, and execute courses of action.

Chapter 14 considers personality in context. We explore contemporary research that illustrates the critical point that you often can learn much about people's personalities by studying the life contexts—the social situations, cultural settings, interpersonal relationships, and so on—that make up their life. This research heavily capitalizes on the social-cognitive perspective discussed in Chapters 12 and 13 while providing a broad portrait of contemporary psychological research on social settings and the individual. We end, in Chapter 15, by critically evaluating the field of personality psychology as a whole.

Finally, the text takes advantage of contemporary knowledge in brain science. Today's personality psychologist has access to information about the brain that was unavailable in the past, when the primary personality theories were developed. This knowledge enables us to reevaluate the personality theories from a contemporary brain-science perspective. We'll do this throughout the book, in multiple chapters, in a feature called *Personality and the Brain*.

**ON THE EXISTENCE OF MULTIPLE THEORIES: THEORIES AS TOOLKITS**

The fact that this book presents these multiple theories might at first seem odd. Courses in most other scientific disciplines (e.g., chemistry, physics) are not organized around a series of different theories. Knowledge is organized by one commonly accepted conceptual framework. In part, this reflects the maturity of these other fields, which have been around longer than the science of psychology. Yet even the “mature sciences” may harbor different views of the same phenomenon. Suppose you were to ask a physicist about the nature of light. You might learn that physics has a theory that says that light is a wave. And you might learn that physics also has a theory that says that light is composed of individual particles. If you were to ask “Which theory is right?” you would be told “Neither.” Light acts as a wave and as a particle. Both a wave theory and a particle theory capture important information about the nature of light.

The same is true for the personality theories. Each captures important information about human nature. As you read about them, you should not be asking yourself “Which theory was right, and which ones are wrong?” Instead, it is better to evaluate them by asking how useful they are in advancing basic knowledge and applications. Even a theory that gets some things wrong may have much value (Proctor & Capaldi, 2001).

As we were preparing a recent edition of this text, a colleague suggested to us a useful metaphor for thinking about personality theories. It is useful because it moves one away from simplistic right/wrong evaluations and toward a more sophisticated view. She suggested that theories are like toolkits. Each theory contains a set of “tools.” Some of these tools are theoretical concepts. Others are research methods. Some are techniques for assessing personality. Yet others are methods for doing therapy. Each element of the theory is a tool in that each serves one or more functions; each, in other words, enables one to carry out one or more jobs. The jobs are things like describing individual
differences, identifying basic human motivations, explaining the development of self-concept, identifying the causes of emotional reactions, predicting performance in work settings, or reducing psychological distress via therapy. These are jobs the psychologist wants to do. Each theory provides conceptual tools for doing them.

The toolkit metaphor has two benefits: It leads one (1) to ask good questions about personality theories and (2) to avoid asking bad ones. To see these benefits, imagine that you are evaluating actual physical toolkits. If you saw a plumber, an electrician, and an auto mechanic each carrying a toolkit of their profession, you would not go up to any of them and say “Your toolkit is wrong.” The idea that a toolkit could be wrong hardly makes sense. A toolkit may be less good than another for doing a particular job. It may be less useful for a range of jobs than some other toolkit that contains more tools. It may be more practical than some other toolkit that contains more tools because the larger toolkit is unwieldy. You would evaluate toolkits by asking about what you can do with them and how they might be improved by adding, or sometimes removing, tools. You would not evaluate them by asking “Which one is correct?”

Similarly, when evaluating the different personality theories we present, we encourage you to ask questions such as “What can one do with the conceptual tools of this theory?” “What advantages do its conceptual tools have in relation to other theories?” or “What tools could be added to (or subtracted from) the theory to make it better?” These questions are better than asking “Which theory is right?”

The toolkit metaphor has a final implication. It suggests that the existence of multiple theories in contemporary personality psychology might not be such a bad thing. In the world of actual physical tools, when people have different toolkits, they might learn new things from one another. They might add a tool from someone else’s kit or be inspired to attempt someone else’s job with the tools they have. In the long run, the diversity among toolkits may improve everyone’s work. The same may be true in the world of theoretical tools. When multiple theories exist, investigators are more likely to face research findings and theoretical arguments that challenge their favored view. The challenges may prompt them to refine, extend, and ultimately improve their own thinking. Theoretical diversity thus can accelerate the overall progress of a discipline.

We hope you enjoy your tour through the erratic, but progressing, enterprise of personality theory and research.

### Major Concepts

- **Hierarchy** Page 10
- **Personality** Page 6
- **Process** Page 11
- **Structure** Page 8
- **System** Page 10
- **Temperament** Page 13
- **Trait** Page 9
- **Type** Page 9
- **Units of analysis** Page 8
1. We all think about personality in our day-to-day lives. The work of personality theorists differs from this everyday thinking in that personality theories pursue five goals that are uncommon in everyday thinking about persons. They engage in (1) scientific observations that underlie theories that are (2) internally coherent and systematic, (3) testable, and (4) comprehensive and that foster (5) useful applications.

2. Personality theories address what, how, and why questions about personality by developing theories that address four distinct topics: (1) personality structure, (2) personality processes, (3) personality development, and (4) personality change (including via psychotherapy).

3. Personality theorists have confronted a range of issues throughout the history of the field. In developing theories that encompass these issues, the theorist hopes to develop a framework that serves three scientific functions: (1) organizing existing knowledge about personality, (2) fostering new knowledge on important issues, and (3) identifying new issues for study.

4. The existence of multiple theories in the field can be understood by thinking of theories as toolkits, each of which provides unique conceptual tools for doing the jobs of the personality psychologist.