The Big Five Personality Dimensions
5 Major Factors of Personality

By Kendra Cherry

Many contemporary personality psychologists believe that there are five basic dimensions of personality, often referred to as the "Big 5" personality traits. The five broad personality traits described by the theory are extraversion, agreeableness, openness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism.

Previous trait theories suggested a various number of possible traits, including Gordon Allport's list of 4,000 personality traits, Raymond Cattell's 16 personality factors, and Hans Eysenck's three-factor theory.

However, many researchers felt that Cattell's theory was too complex and Eysenck's was too limited in scope. As a result, the five-factor theory emerged to describe the basic traits that serve as the building blocks of personality.

What Are the Big Five Dimensions of Personality?

Today, many researchers believe that they are five core personality traits. Evidence of this theory has been growing over the past 50 years, beginning with the research of D. W. Fiske (1949) and later expanded upon by other researchers including Norman (1967), Smith (1967), Goldberg (1981), and McCrae & Costa (1987).

The "big five" are broad categories of personality traits. While there is a significant body of literature supporting this five-factor model of personality, researchers don't always agree on the exact labels for each dimension. However, these five categories are usually described as follows:
**Extraversion:** This trait includes characteristics such as excitability, sociability, talkativeness, assertiveness and high amounts of emotional expressiveness.

**Agreeableness:** This personality dimension includes attributes such as trust, altruism, kindness, affection, and other prosocial behaviors.

**Conscientiousness:** Common features of this dimension include high levels of thoughtfulness, with good impulse control and goal-directed behaviors. Those high in conscientiousness tend to be organized and mindful of details.

**Neuroticism:** Individuals high in this trait tend to experience emotional instability, anxiety, moodiness, irritability, and sadness.

**Openness:** This trait features characteristics such as imagination and insight, and those high in this trait also tend to have a broad range of interests. It is important to note that each of the five personality factors represents a range between two extremes. For example, extraversion represents a continuum between extreme extraversion and extreme introversion. In the real world, most people lie somewhere in between the two polar ends of each dimension.

**Big 5 Personality Research**

McCrae and his colleagues have also found that the big five traits are also remarkably universal. One study that looked at people from more than 50 different cultures found that the five dimensions could be accurately used to describe personality.

Based on this research, many psychologists now believe that the five personality dimensions are not only universal; they also have biological origins. Psychology David Buss has proposed that an evolutionary explanation for these five core personality traits, suggesting that these personality traits represent the most important qualities that shape our social landscape.
Final Thoughts

Always remember that behavior involves an interaction between a person's underlying personality and situational variables. The situation that a person finds himself or herself in plays a major role in how the person reacts. However, in most cases, people offer responses that are consistent with their underlying personality traits.

These dimensions represent broad areas of personality. Research has demonstrated that these groupings of characteristics tend to occur together in many people. For example, individuals who are sociable tend to be talkative. However, these traits do not always occur together. Personality is a complex and varied and each person may display behaviors across several of these dimensions.

Further Reading


