Trait Theories & Informal Approaches to Personality

Personality Traits and Personality Temperaments

Another way of analyzing an individual's personality is in terms of personality traits. Trait theories are actually formal assessment tools, researched and designed by such famous psychologists as Allport, Cattell, and Eysenck (O--alpsych.com). These theories are often applied in an informal manner, however, which is why they are described in this course as "informal approaches" to personality.

A trait is a quality individuals have in common with each other, though one person may have more of this quality than another. Examples of traits are friendliness, outgoingness, sensitivity, trust, and many others.

A temperament is generally thought of as a set of personality characteristics, or traits, a person may have, as may be exhibited in behavioral patterns. An example might be extraversion, which is a tendency for a person to be energetic, friendly, and sociable. Temperament is often presented in psychology as innate, or occurring at birth, with a given temperament pattern continuing throughout the lifespan. The Keirsey Temperament Sorter (O-Keirsey.com), similar to the popular Myers-Briggs Type Indicator test (O-Myers-Briggs.org), is an assessment tool measuring a person's tendencies toward four temperament patterns. If interested in using the Keirsey tool, follow the instructions on the website and use it more for fun than for self-diagnosis. You will need to register before completing the 70-item Keirsey test but there is no cost to do so.

Personality Types

Sometimes people's behavioral and thought patterns are classified very generally as personality "types." Students of psychology may already be familiar with the Type A personality type, for instance. According to a theory researched by cardiologists Meyer Friedman and Ray H. Rosenman in the 1950s, a Type A personality is characterized by impatience, aggression, anger, competitiveness, and the need for control over situations. Individuals labeled as "Type A" may experience more cardiovascular complications (high blood pressure, poor cholesterol blood tests, heart disease, e.g.) than an individual who does not exhibit these personality characteristics. While there was initial research supporting this theory, subsequent studies were unable to confirm a relationship between "Type A" behavior patterns and heart disease risk. Measuring a qualitative term like "Type A" is problematic, especially if people have different ideas on what it means. Interestingly, in 2012, Petticrew, Lee, and McKee¹ published a paper describing how the tobacco companies funded much of the Type A research, which would be a convenient way to convince the general public that tobacco had nothing to do with cardiovascular problems, but rather a person's personality. Despite the fanfare, the "Type A" personality is still referenced in the media.

After the Type A personality was defined, Type B and Type C personality types were later described. The Type B personality is nearly opposite of Type A, as it associated with patience, being "laid back" or calm, being less time urgent. The Type C personality type fits the person who may be very busy and task-driven, but who may also have a tendency to be passive and hold anger inside. The Type C personality was studied as a potential link to increased cancer risk.² As is the case with Type A personality, measuring a "type" that can be perceived differently from one person to another will lead to limitations in making conclusions. In the big picture, however, these informal personality classifications led to conversations about how emotional and behavioral patterns could be problematic for health.
Are you Type A? If interested, take a test to assess your Type A tendencies at the Body Mind Queendom Page (O). Please use this test not as a diagnosis, but as an understanding into the components which make up the "Type A" personality. (O)

**Attitudes**

The attitudes we exude to friends, family, acquaintances, and strangers often reveal a lot about who we are. An example of an attitude is the optimist/pessimist point of view. An optimist usually has a positive bent on potentially stressful situations, while a pessimist usually has a negative outlook. As many may already be familiar, an optimist considers a glass filled halfway as "half full" while a pessimist considers the same glass "half empty." Optimistic and pessimistic attitudes not only demonstrate the effects on a person's outlook on life, but may also affect a person's state of health. Travel to Science Daily to learn more about how optimism and pessimism affect heart health (R).

Hilary Tindle, a University of Pittsburgh Assistant Professor of Medicine, writes about Why Pessimism is Hazardous to Your Health (O-NextAvenue.org, 6/27/13). Maria Cohut describes a different approach in the article, Can Pessimism be Beneficial? (Medical News Today, 10/27/17).
