Individual Differences and Personality
Individual Differences and Personality

Michael C. Ashton

Professor
Department of Psychology
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario
Canada
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgments**  xv  
**Preface**  xvii  

**Introduction**  
The Study of Personality  xix  
The Universal, the Unique, and the In-Between  xx  
Idiographic versus Nomothetic Approaches  xxi  
Outline of This Book  xxiii  

**Chapter 1: Basic Concepts in Psychological Measurement**  
Some Simple Statistical Ideas  2  
*Levels of Measurement*  2  
*Standard Scores*  3  
**BOX 1-1: The Normal Distribution**  4  
*Correlation Coefficients*  5  
**BOX 1-2: Calculating the Correlation Coefficient**  8  
Assessing Quality of Measurement: Reliability and Validity  9  
*Reliability*  9  
*Internal-Consistency Reliability*  10  
**BOX 1-3: Calculating Internal-Consistency Reliability**  13  
*Interrater (Interobserver) Reliability*  14  
*Test–Retest Reliability*  15  
*Validity*  16  
*Content Validity*  16  
*Criterion Validity: Convergent and Discriminant*  18  
*Construct Validity*  19  
Methods of Measurement: Self- and Observer Reports, Direct Observations, Biodata  20  
*Self-Reports*  20  

---
Observer Reports 21
Direct Observations 22
Biodata (Life-Outcome Data) 23
Comparing the Methods of Measurement 23
Summary and Conclusions 24

Chapter 2: Personality Traits and the Inventories That Measure Them
The Idea of a Personality Trait 27
Differences among Individuals 28
In a Typical Tendency to Behave, Think, or Feel 28
In Some Conceptually Related Ways 28
Across a Variety of Relevant Situations 29
Over Some Fairly Long Period of Time 29
Personality Traits and Other Psychological Characteristics 29
Do Personality Traits Exist? 30
Research Studies Testing the Existence of Traits 30
The Importance of Aggregation: Some Familiar Examples 32
BOX 2-1: Variance Due to Situations, Persons, and Person-by-Situation Interactions 33
Measuring Traits by Self- or Observer Report: Structured Personality Inventories 34
Strategies of Personality Inventory Construction 36
The Empirical Strategy 36
The Factor-Analytic Strategy 39
The Rational Strategy 39
Comparisons of the Three Strategies 41
BOX 2-2: Some Widely Used Personality Inventories 41
Self- and Observer Reports on Personality Inventory Scales 45
Agreement between Self- and Observer Reports 45
Why Do Self- and Observer Reports Tend to Agree? 46
The Validity of Self- and Observer Reports in Predicting Behavior 48
BOX 2-3: Projective Tests 49
Summary and Conclusions 51

Chapter 3: Personality Structure: Classifying Traits
Which Traits to Measure? Completeness without Redundancy 53
A Gentle Introduction to Factor Analysis 54
Factor Analysis of Personality Traits: How to Find a Representative Set of Traits? 59
The Idea of the Lexical Approach 60
The Early Use of the Lexical Approach 61
Lexical Studies in the English Language: The Big Five Personality Factors 62
The Big Five 62
Personality Inventories and the Five-Factor Model 64
Lexical Studies in Many Languages: The HEXACO Personality Factors 66
Different Languages, Same Six Factors 66
BOX 3-1: Many Traits Are Blends of Two or More Factors 70
The HEXACO Model of Personality Structure 70
What It All Means: A Few Dimensions, but Many Personalities 72
Summary and Conclusions 73
BOX 3-2: Broad Factors versus Narrow Traits 74

Chapter 4: Developmental Change and Stability of Personality
Defining Change and Stability 77
Developmental Changes in Mean Levels of Personality Traits 79
Longitudinal Research Studies 79
Patterns of Life Span Change: Increasing Maturity? 80
Stability of Traits across the Years (and the Life Span) 82
Stability across a Period of Several Years during Adulthood 82
Stability across Longer Periods of Time during Adulthood 83
Stability during Adolescence and Young Adulthood 84
Personality in Childhood and Infancy: Measurement and Structure 86
Personality Structure during Childhood 86
Developmental Change in Personality Traits during Childhood 88
Stability of Traits during Childhood 89
BOX 4-1: The Development of Self-Esteem across the Life Span 89
Summary and Conclusions 90

Chapter 5: Biological Bases of Personality
Early Ideas: The Four “Humors” and Personality 93
BOX 5-1: Physique and Personality 95
Neurotransmitters 96
Cloninger’s Theory 97
Dopamine and Novelty Seeking 97
Serotonin and Harm Avoidance 98
Norepinephrine and Reward Dependence 98
Empirical Tests of Cloninger’s Theory 99
Brain Structures 99
Gray’s Theory 99
The Behavioral Activation System 100
The Behavioral Inhibition System 100
The Fight-or-Flight System 100
Eysenck’s Theory 101
Extraversion 101
Chapter 6: Genetic and Environmental Influences on Personality

The Question: Nature versus Nurture 114
Examining the Similarity of Relatives 114
Separating Heredity and Environment 116

- Examining the Similarity of Identical Twins Raised Apart 116
- Examining the Similarity of Other Relatives Raised Apart 116
- Additive and Nonadditive Heritability 117
- Comparing the Similarity of Different Kinds of Relatives 119
- Examining the Similarity of Adoptive Relatives: Common and Unique Environment 120

The Answers 121

- Similarities between Relatives 121
- Strong Genetic Influences (Both Additive and Nonadditive), with Weak Common Environment Influence 122

Assumptions Underlying Heritability Studies in General 124

- Are Relatives’ Personalities Really Measured Independently? 124
- Is There Really No Assortative Mating for Personality? 127

Assumptions Underlying Twin-Based Heritability Studies in Particular 128

- Are Twins’ Early Environments Really Separate? 128
- Are Twins’ Adoptive Households Really Very Different? 129
- Are Identical Twins Really Treated Differently by Others? 131

Effects of the Unique Environment on Personality? Parental Treatment, Peer Groups, and Birth Order 132

- Parental Treatment and Peer Groups 132
- Birth Order 133

BOX 6-1: Identifying Specific Genes That Influence Personality: Molecular Genetic Studies 134

Summary and Conclusions 134

Appendix: Difficulties in Separating the Effects of Heredity and Environment 135
Chapter 7: The Evolutionary Function of Personality

The Idea of Evolution by Natural Selection 142
Why Are We Not All the Same? Fluctuating Optimum and Frequency-Dependence 144
Several Reasons Why Variation Does Not Go Away 144
Fluctuating Optimum: Ideal Levels of a Characteristic Vary across Places and Times 145
Frequency Dependence: The Advantages of Doing What Others Are Not Doing 146
The Operation of the Fluctuating Optimum and Frequency Dependence: Genetic and Developmental Routes 147

Adaptive Trade-offs between High and Low Levels of the HEXACO Personality Factors 148
Honesty–Humility 148
Agreeableness 149
Emotionality 149
Summary for Honesty–Humility, Agreeableness, and Emotionality: Altruism versus Aggression 150

BOX 7-1: Sex Differences in Personality Traits: The Emotionality Factor 151
Extraversion 151
Conscientiousness 151
Openness to Experience 152
Summary for Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience: Engagement in Areas of Endeavor 152

BOX 7-2: Adaptive Trade-offs from the Perspective of the Big Five Personality Dimensions 153

The Operation of the Fluctuating Optimum and Frequency Dependence: Some Examples 153
Honesty–Humility and Agreeableness 153
Emotionality 156
Extraversion 157
Conscientiousness 158
Openness to Experience 158

Summary and Conclusions 160
BOX 7-3: Cross-Generational and Cross-National Differences in Mean Levels of Personality Traits 160
BOX 7-4: How “Old” Are Personality Characteristics? Evidence from Studies of Animal Personality 161
Chapter 8: Personality Disorders

The Idea of a Personality Disorder 163
The DSM-IV Personality Disorders 165
  Schizoid 165
  Schizotypal 165
  Paranoid 166
  Antisocial 166
  Borderline 166
  Histrionic 167
  Narcissistic 167
  Avoidant 167
  Dependent 167
  Obsessive-Compulsive 168
Classifying the DSM-IV Personality Disorders: Clusters A, B, and C 168
Disorders Considered for Inclusion in DSM-IV but Rejected 169
  Depressive 169
  Passive-Aggressive (Negativistic) 170
  Self-Defeating 170
  Sadistic 170
Other Personality-Related Disorders Not Included as DSM-IV Personality Disorders 171
  Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder 171
  Separation Anxiety Disorder 172
  Oppositional Defiant Disorder 172
  Specific Phobias 173
Summary 174
Problems with the Concept of Personality Disorders 174
Alternative Systems for Personality Disorder Diagnosis 176
Origins of Personality Disorders: Development, Biological Bases, Heredity and Environment, and Evolutionary Function 178
Summary and Conclusions 179

Chapter 9: Personality and Life Outcomes

Does Personality Predict Features of One’s Life Story? 181
Relationships and Marriage 182
  Are Spouses Similar in Personality? 182
  Marital Satisfaction 183
  Attachment Styles 185
  Parenting Styles 186
Peer Relationships: Friendships and Status 186
Health-Related Outcomes 187
  Substance Use 188
Table of Contents

Longevity 189
Heart Disease (and “Type A” Personality) 192
Academic Performance 193
Job Performance 194
How to Assess Job Performance? 195
The Role of Conscientiousness 195
Specific Traits: The Case of Proactivity 196
Integrity Tests 197
The Problem of Faking 198
BOX 9-1: Personality and Occupational Choice 199
Law-Abidingness versus Criminality 200
The Role of Self-Control 200
Primary and Secondary Psychopathy 201
BOX 9-2: Self-Esteem, Narcissism, and Aggression 203
Life Satisfaction 203
BOX 9-3: Job Satisfaction 205
Summary and Conclusions 205

Chapter 10: Mental Ability

The Domain of Mental Ability 210
The Structure of Mental Ability: One Dimension or Many? 211
Spearman and the g Factor 214
Thurstone and Group Factors 217
g Plus Group Factors 218
Developmental Change and Stability in Mental Abilities 220
Developmental Changes in Mean Levels of Mental Ability 220
Stability of Mental Ability across the Life Span 221
Biological Bases of Mental Ability 222
Brain Size 222
Nerve Conduction Velocity 223
Reaction Time 224
Inspection Time 226
Brain Waves: Averaged Evoked Potentials 227
Brain Glucose Metabolism 228
Genetic and Environmental Influences on Mental Ability 228
Genetic Influences 228
Womb Environment Influences 230
Other Environmental Influences: Nutrition 231
BOX 10-1: Chorion Type as an Example of Womb Environment Influences on Mental Ability 232
Evolutionary Function of Mental Ability 234
Mental Ability and Life Outcomes 237
Academic Achievement and Performance 237
Job Performance, Occupational Status, and Income 240
Table of Contents

Longevity and Health 242
Law-Abidingness versus Criminality 243
Marriage: Assortative Mating 245
Not All g-Loaded Tasks Are the Same 245
Novel versus Familiar Tasks: Fluid and Crystallized Intelligence 246
Generational Changes in Mental Abilities: The Flynn Effect 246
Reasoning with Numbers and Shapes versus Understanding Verbal Concepts:
Different Relations with Personality 248
Alternative Ideas about Mental Abilities 249
Gardner’s “Theory of Multiple Intelligences” 249
Sternberg’s “Triarchic Theory of Intelligence” 251
Emotional Intelligence 253
Summary and Conclusions 255

Chapter 11: Religion and Politics

Religion 260
Is Religiosity a Personality Characteristic? 260
BOX 11-1: Cross-Generational and Cross-National Differences in
Religiosity 261
Religiosity and the Major Dimensions of Personality 261
Developmental Change and Stability in Religiosity 264
Religiosity and Paranormal Beliefs 265
Religiosity and Life Outcomes 266
Politics 267
Right-Wing Authoritarianism 267
Social Dominance Orientation 269
Relations between Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance
Orientation 270
BOX 11-2: Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance
within Minority Groups 271
Two Dimensions of Political Attitudes 272
Political Attitudes and the Major Dimensions of Personality 273
Political Attitudes, Social Values, and Religion 274
Developmental Change and Stability in Political Attitudes 276
Origins of Religious Beliefs and Political Attitudes: Biological Bases, Genetic and
Environmental Influences, and Evolutionary Function 278
Biological Bases 278
Genetic and Environmental Influences 278
Evolutionary Function 281
Summary and Conclusions 281

Chapter 12: Sexuality

Major Dimensions of Sexuality 285
Sexuality and Personality 287
Table of Contents

Sexual Arousal and Personality 287
Sexual Commitment and Personality 288
Sexual Orientation and Personality 289

BOX 12-1: Cross-Generational and Cross-National Differences in Sexuality 292
Origins of Variation in Sexuality: Genetic and Environmental Influences, Biological Bases, and Evolution 292

BOX 12-2: Religiosity and Sexuality 293
Sexual Commitment (or Restricted versus Unrestricted Sociosexuality) 294
Genetic and Environmental Influences 294
Biological Bases 294
Evolutionary Function 295

Sexual Orientation 297
Genetic and Environmental Influences and Biological Bases 297
Difficulties in Estimating the Heritability of Sexual Orientation 297
Causes of Sexual Orientation? “Exotic Becomes Erotic” 298
Causes of Sexual Orientation? Number of Older Brothers 299
Evolutionary Function 301

BOX 12-3: The Evolution of Sex Differences in Vocational Interests? 302
Sexual Arousal 302
Genetic and Environmental Influences 302
Biological Bases 303
Evolutionary Function 303
Summary and Conclusions 304

Conclusion
What We Have Learned So Far 305
What We Have Yet to Learn 309
Final Remarks 311

References 313
Index 331
Writing a textbook is a big job, and I want to thank many people for the help of various kinds that they have given me.

I would like to thank several people at Elsevier/Academic Press. My publisher, Nikki Levy, received my textbook proposal with enthusiasm and gave much help and advice throughout the publication process. My developmental editor, Barbara Makinster, and my production managers, Christie Jozwiak and Julie Ochs, were highly efficient and very patient in their work of converting the original manuscript into a textbook.

I should also thank several individuals who were generous in allowing me to include their test items or not-yet-published data in this book. Ted Jackson of Sigma Assessment Systems kindly permitted me to reproduce example items from the Nonverbal Personality Questionnaire and the Multidimensional Aptitude Battery. Lew Goldberg shared the data from his Eugene-Springfield Community Sample. David Schmitt provided further analyses of his data on personality and sexuality. Erik Noffle and Richard Robins shared their current work on personality and academic aptitude.

I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Department of Psychology at Brock University for their support. I especially appreciate the helpful advice of John Mitterer, Stan Sadava, and Sid Segalowitz concerning the textbook publishing process. My graduate students, Beth Visser and Julie Pozzebon, also deserve my thanks for their patience throughout the writing of this book. I also thank Linda Pidduck for her help in preparing figures.

This textbook reflects my thinking about personality psychology, which has been influenced by the teachers who supervised me during my years as a student. I thank Jerry Hogan, the late Doug Jackson, and Sam Paunonen for sharing their learning with me.

There are also a few friends and colleagues whose encouragement was of great help in motivating me to undertake and persist with this project. I thank Reinout de Vries, Paul Tremblay, and Gordon Hodson for their support and also for their advice on several aspects of the book.

A special thanks goes to my friend and colleague Kibeom Lee. His detailed comments on a previous full draft were invaluable, as was his advice on the organization and content of the book more generally. I thank Kibeom for his intellectual input, but also for his very helpful moral support throughout the writing of this book.
Most of all, I would like to thank my parents for the enormous encouragement that they have always given, and for the special interest that they took in this latest project of mine. I also give a special thanks to my sister and brother-in-law, whose three “projects” have helped me to keep mine in perspective. This book is dedicated to John, Michael, and Caroline.
The central aim of personality psychology is to understand differences between people. With this in mind, my purpose in writing this textbook was to describe the main questions about the nature of personality variation, and to explain the answers that have been learned so far.

The organization of this textbook largely follows from this aim, and differs from that of most other textbooks in this discipline. In the past, most authors structured their textbooks around the theorists who had written about personality psychology, with each chapter being devoted to the work of a different theorist. More recently, some authors have organized their textbooks in terms of several distinct “domains” or “approaches” within the discipline of personality psychology. The structure of this textbook is closer to the latter than to the former, in the sense of being organized around issues rather than around theorists. But the present textbook emphasizes the unity of the discipline, by treating the diverse areas of research in personality psychology as efforts to answer a series of related questions about the same basic phenomenon—human personality variation.

This book begins with some basic orientation to the discipline, by explaining the nomothetic approach to personality and by introducing the basic principles of personality measurement. The idea of a personality trait is then described, along with the evidence for the existence (and the measurability) of those traits. At this point, the stage is set for an examination of the big questions of personality psychology.

The first issue to be examined is that of personality structure—of finding the basic dimensions that summarize personality traits. The next topic is that of the development of personality, in terms of stability and change in personality trait levels across the life span. Then follows an examination of the origins of personality variation, in the sense of its proximal biological causes (i.e., in brain structures and substances) and its more distal sources (i.e., in genes and environmental features). This leads to the question of the function of personality variation throughout human evolution, and of the consequences of personality variation in modern society, with attention to personality disorders and also to diverse “life outcomes”—involving relationships, work, health, and so on—that are influenced by personality.

All of those chapters deal with personality variation as defined in a somewhat narrow sense, and thereby leave aside some important areas of psychological variation, including mental abilities as well as religious beliefs and political attitudes in addition to various aspects of sexuality. These individual differences are often omitted altogether from personality textbooks, but I have included them here in recognition of their importance to
personality in a broader sense of the term. Each of the remaining chapters of the textbook examines a different one of these domains, discussing its relations with the major personality dimensions and also addressing the same questions as those considered for personality traits throughout the earlier chapters of the book. Finally, a concluding chapter summarizes and integrates the previous sections of the book, drawing attention to the major findings of personality research as well as the important questions that remain to be answered.

A few brief notes to the instructor: It is strongly recommended that the Introduction be assigned as required reading. The chapter on genetic and environmental influences contains an appendix about genotype–environment interactions and genotype–environment correlations, two rather advanced topics that may be considered optional. The chapter on mental abilities is about twice as long as the others, and might therefore be assigned to students over a longer period of time. Finally, the chapter on personality disorders is to some extent a departure from the framework of addressing questions about the nature of personality variation, and is included chiefly for its practical and clinical relevance; the decision to assign this chapter will thus depend on the aims of the course.
Welcome to the fascinating world of personality psychology!

One of the most intriguing aspects of life is the variety that we notice in the people around us. People differ, of course, in their outward physical characteristics. But the variety among human beings is not just “skin deep”: People also differ in their typical ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling. And it is these differences in psychological characteristics—these differences in personality—that seem so important to us for defining who a person is. All around the world, people notice the personalities of the people around them, and all around the world, people find it useful to describe each other’s personalities: Is this person outgoing or shy? Sensitive or tough? Creative or conventional? Quick-tempered or patient? Sincere or deceitful? Disorganized or self-disciplined?

You have probably observed these differences in personality all throughout your life. Even when you were a young child playing in the playground, you probably realized very early that the other kids had very different styles of playing: Some shared their toys more than others did, some would “tattle-tale” more than others would, some liked to compete more than others did, and so on. (You probably also realized that the adults who supervised that playground were not all the same either: Some punished more severely than others did, some watched the playground more closely than others did, and so on.) And ever since that time, you have no doubt noticed the different personalities of the people around you—relatives, friends, classmates, co-workers, or anyone else you have encountered.

But have you ever wondered about personality? Have you ever been struck by the sheer variety of people’s personalities—by the many ways that one person can be similar to and
different from another person? Have you ever speculated about why people have such varied personalities—about what causes the differences between one person and the next? Have you ever wondered whether personality really matters in life—whether someone’s personality will influence their relationships, their career, their health? If so, then you have come to the right place: These are exactly the kinds of questions that we will try to answer in this book.

Of course, these questions are not new: People have speculated and debated about them for centuries. More than 2000 years ago, the ancient Greeks were fascinated by the variety of personalities that people exhibit. One philosopher, Theophrastus, even wrote a book describing the many characteristics he observed in others. Greek doctors, such as Hippocrates and Galen, wrote that different bodily fluids were responsible for the major personality characteristics. But the first attempts to examine personality in a systematic, scientific way were not undertaken until much more recently: There were some promising beginnings in the late nineteenth century, then some scattered progress leading up to the late twentieth century, and then an explosion of discoveries that continues into the twenty-first century. And this is what makes the field of personality research so exciting: It examines fundamental, age-old questions about the human condition—questions whose answers are only now finally being revealed.

### The Universal, the Unique, and the In-Between

Before going any further, we should examine what kinds of questions this book will consider, and what kinds of questions it will not. A good way to summarize this is to consider three categories of topics that psychologists can study in regard to human behavior.

At one extreme, some psychologists study the universal aspects of human nature—the ways in which everyone tends to be similar in their behavior. That is, some researchers investigate the circumstances in which people in general are likely to behave in a certain way. For example, one could try to find the conditions that cause all (or almost all) people to show a particular reaction, such as conforming to group norms, retaliating against an attacker, feeling closely attached to one’s parents, helping a person in distress, rebelling against authority, changing opinions on a topic, boasting about achievements, feeling sexually attracted to someone, and so on.

At the other extreme, some psychologists examine the unique combinations of very specific features that make a given person different from everyone else. That is, some researchers investigate the ways in which each person behaves differently when confronted with various situations or circumstances. For example, perhaps one of your friends can relax and reduce stress by listening to music not by exercising, whereas the opposite may be true for another of your friends. Perhaps the first friend is irritated by criticisms of his or her physical appearance but not of the quality of his or her work, whereas the opposite may be true for the second friend. And perhaps the first friend would be tempted to eat too much chocolate but not too much pizza, whereas the opposite may be true for the second friend.
In between these two extremes, some psychologists explore the ways in which any given person can be similar to some people yet different from other people. That is, some researchers investigate the important characteristics (or traits) along which people vary, with the aim of measuring those characteristics, and of learning about their causes and their consequences. For example, how can we measure (and thus compare) different people’s overall levels of honesty or of creativity? What are the reasons why people differ from one another in their usual levels of fearfulness or of impulsiveness? What are the consequences—for relationships or for work or for health—of differences among people in their typical levels of cheerfulness or of stubbornness?

The focus of this book will be on this third, intermediate category of topics. The first category—that of the universal features of human nature—is studied in great detail by researchers in many areas of psychology, particularly social psychology. The topics of that category are obviously very interesting, and they are certainly relevant to an understanding of personality. But because those topics have been so thoroughly investigated by researchers in other areas of psychology, we will not consider them here.

The second category—that of the unique aspects of each individual—is examined in a subjective way by many insightful observers of the human condition, including novelists, playwrights, poets, philosophers, biographers, and historians. In addition, the topics of that category are also studied in a more systematic way by some personality psychologists. However, many personality psychologists believe that we can learn much more about personality by studying the third category of topics. To understand the reason for this opinion, consider two different ways in which we could approach the study of personality: The idiographic approach and the nomothetic approach (e.g., Allport, 1937).

Idiographic versus Nomothetic Approaches

As noted before, one way of studying personality is to examine individual persons in detail, with the aim of identifying the unique features of each individual’s personality. You have already encountered this approach used many times, whenever you have read or watched a biography or a “case study” of a person’s life.

Let us consider an example of how this approach might work. Suppose that we wanted to write a detailed description of the personality of our classmate, Alice. To do so, we would study Alice’s personality in depth. For example, we might conduct interviews with her, with her family members, and with her friends, and we might observe her behavior directly, across many situations and over a long period of time. (We will assume that Alice would agree to some invasions of her privacy.)

After all of this careful investigation, we might conclude that the most striking features of Alice’s personality are her fear of the disapproval of others and her strong sense of responsibility in her dealings with others. So, when writing our biography of Alice, we would draw attention to these aspects of her personality, and we would illustrate them with various episodes from her life. But in writing this biography, we might also want to try to explain why these are the outstanding features of her personality. In looking for
clues, we might notice that Alice’s parents had a very strict style of raising their children, and expressed strong disapproval whenever Alice behaved “badly” as a child. From these observations, we might decide that it was Alice’s strict upbringing that caused her fear of disapproval of others, and that this fear of disapproval in turn caused her to be a very responsible person. It might be difficult to prove this conclusively, but we could certainly make a persuasive argument to support this explanation of how these prominent aspects of Alice’s personality had developed.

This strategy of studying the many unique details of an individual’s personality is called the idiographic approach, and it has some obvious strengths. By its very nature, it can give us some interesting insights into the really distinctive features of an individual’s personality, and it can even give us some fascinating clues as to the origins of those features. These strengths might help to explain why most of us find the biographies of famous people and the stories of fictional characters to be so captivating.

On the other hand, the idiographic approach also has some weaknesses. One obvious shortcoming is inefficiency: It would simply be too expensive and too time-consuming to study a large number of people in so much detail, and as a result our knowledge of personality would be based on a very small number of cases. This inefficiency is also seen in the relatively small segment of “personality” that really stands out in any one person. Remember that Alice did not strike us as being, say, especially ambitious, or especially artistic. So, if we had been hoping to learn more about those particular aspects of personality, we would need to keep looking for other individuals to study.

But perhaps an even more serious shortcoming of the idiographic approach is that it does not easily allow us to figure out any general laws about personality. Recall that when we studied Alice, we decided that her very responsible and dependable nature was caused by her need for approval of others, which was in turn the result of the strict upbringing given to her by her parents. But, do we really know for sure that people who are very responsible also tend to be very fearful of the disapproval of others? And do we really know that people whose upbringing was strict also tend to be responsible, or to be afraid of disapproval? Perhaps if we looked at a large number of people, we would find that, on average, responsible people are no more afraid of others’ disapproval than irresponsible people are. And maybe we would find that people raised by strict parents are no more fearful of disapproval than are people raised by very permissive parents. So, although the idiographic approach can give us some interesting ideas about personality, it does not allow us to test whether or not those ideas are actually correct.

Because of these drawbacks associated with the idiographic approach, most personality researchers now prefer the other strategy, which is called the nomothetic approach. In the nomothetic approach, the researcher studies certain features of the personalities of many different people, and then compares those people in an effort to figure out some general rules about personality. The nomothetic approach usually involves measuring some interesting variables in a large group of people, and then finding out how those variables are related. For example, our study of Alice might suggest to us that traits such as responsibility and fear of disapproval might be worth measuring in a large sample of people, to find out whether or not those traits usually go together. Using the nomothetic approach, we could also study the hypothesized causes of one’s personality, such as parental
child-rearing style or the levels of a certain hormone or neurotransmitter chemical; likewise, we could also study the hypothesized consequences of one’s personality, such as job performance, marital satisfaction, or criminal record.

The great strength of the nomothetic approach is that it does allow us to find general laws of personality. Because the aim of any scientific research is to discover the laws that govern nature, the nomothetic approach is clearly the best choice for researchers who wish to understand the laws of personality. For example, we can use the nomothetic approach to find out whether two personality characteristics are related to each other, or to find out whether some presumed “causes” or “consequences” of a personality characteristic are really related to that trait. By using the nomothetic approach, we can gradually learn more and more about the personality characteristics that differentiate people, and about the origins and the effects of those personality differences. But in addition, the nomothetic strategy can also teach us a great deal about the personalities of individual persons. For example, if we can assess an individual’s personality in terms of several important characteristics, then the overall pattern produced by this combination of variables is likely to be very informative, and to give a description that is virtually unique.

Thus, it is for these reasons that we will study personality using the nomothetic approach, rather than using the idiographic approach. By focusing on the ways in which people differ from (and are similar to) each other, we can learn some general laws about personality. Moreover, we can also learn a great deal about any individual person, perhaps more than we could learn by trying to study individuals one at a time.

Of course, all of this is not to say that idiographic approaches are not valuable, or that a study of the unique features of an individual is uninteresting. On the contrary, a creative personality scientist will probably derive some of his or her original insights from making observations made in daily life, from reading great works of fiction, or from studying the biographies of famous persons.

Outline of This Book

Now that we have established the general approach that we will adopt in our study of personality, let us have a brief overview of the major questions to be addressed in this book.

First, we will start with some basic concepts in psychological measurement, and with some basic issues about the existence of personality: How do we know that personality traits really exist? How can we measure those characteristics? What are the main traits that make up our personalities?

Then we will look at the nature of personality: How does personality change throughout the life span? In what ways do the workings of our brains and bodies influence our personalities? Is personality shaped more by genes or by environments? How did personality evolve in our early ancestors?

Next we will consider the practical importance of personality: Are there “disorders” of personality? What is the role of personality in aspects of life such as relationships, work, health, the law, and satisfaction with life?
Finally, we will look at personality in relation to some other important psychological characteristics—characteristics that we will also examine in their own right. How does personality relate to mental abilities? To religious beliefs and political attitudes? To sexuality?

Personality psychology is surely one of the most exciting fields of knowledge—get ready to enjoy studying it for the first time!