

Individual Differences and Personality

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

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

Chapter 2: *Personality Traits and the Inventories That Measure Them*

The Idea of a Personality Trait	27
<i>Differences among Individuals</i>	28
<i>In a Typical Tendency to Behave, Think, or Feel</i>	28
<i>In Some Conceptually Related Ways</i>	28
<i>Across a Variety of Relevant Situations</i>	29
<i>Over Some Fairly Long Period of Time</i>	29
Personality Traits and Other Psychological Characteristics	29
Do Personality Traits Exist?	30
<i>Research Studies Testing the Existence of Traits</i>	30
<i>The Importance of Aggregation: Some Familiar Examples</i>	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
<i>The Empirical Strategy</i>	36
<i>The Factor-Analytic Strategy</i>	39
<i>The Rational Strategy</i>	39
<i>Comparisons of the Three Strategies</i>	41
BOX 2-2: Some Widely Used Personality Inventories	41
Self- and Observer Reports on Personality Inventory Scales	45
<i>Agreement between Self- and Observer Reports</i>	45
<i>Why Do Self- and Observer Reports Tend to Agree?</i>	46
<i>The Validity of Self- and Observer Reports in Predicting Behavior</i>	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
<i>The Idea of the Lexical Approach</i>	60
<i>The Early Use of the Lexical Approach</i>	61
Lexical Studies in the English Language: The Big Five Personality Factors	62

<i>The Big Five</i>	62	
<i>Personality Inventories and the Five-Factor Model</i>	64	
Lexical Studies in Many Languages: The HEXACO Personality Factors	66	
<i>Different Languages, Same Six Factors</i>	66	
BOX 3-1: Many Traits Are Blends of Two or More Factors		70
<i>The HEXACO Model of Personality Structure</i>	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
<i>Longitudinal Research Studies</i>	79	
<i>Patterns of Life Span Change: Increasing Maturity?</i>		80
Stability of Traits across the Years (and the Life Span)		82
<i>Stability across a Period of Several Years during Adulthood</i>		82
<i>Stability across Longer Periods of Time during Adulthood</i>		83
<i>Stability during Adolescence and Young Adulthood</i>	84	
Personality in Childhood and Infancy: Measurement and Structure		86
<i>Personality Structure during Childhood</i>	86	
<i>Developmental Change in Personality Traits during Childhood</i>		88
<i>Stability of Traits during Childhood</i>	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	
<i>Cloninger’s Theory</i>	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	
<i>Gray’s Theory</i>	99	
The Behavioral Activation System		100
The Behavioral Inhibition System		100
The Fight-or-Flight System	100	
<i>Eysenck’s Theory</i>	101	
Extraversion	101	

Neuroticism	102
Psychoticism	102
<i>Comparing Gray's and Eysenck's Dimensions</i>	102
<i>Empirical Evidence and the Theories of Gray and Eysenck</i>	103
<i>Zuckerman's Model</i>	105
BOX 5-2: Some Biological Bases for Conscientiousness?	106
Hormones	106
<i>Testosterone</i>	107
<i>Cortisol</i>	108
<i>Oxytocin</i>	109
BOX 5-3: Is Personality Related to Blood Type, Handwriting Style, or Astrological Sign?	110
Summary and Conclusions	111

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
<i>Examining the Similarity of Identical Twins Raised Apart</i>	116
<i>Examining the Similarity of Other Relatives Raised Apart</i>	116
<i>Additive and Nonadditive Heritability</i>	117
<i>Comparing the Similarity of Different Kinds of Relatives</i>	119
<i>Examining the Similarity of Adoptive Relatives: Common and Unique Environment</i>	120
The Answers	121
<i>Similarities between Relatives</i>	121
<i>Strong Genetic Influences (Both Additive and Nonadditive), with Weak Common Environment Influence</i>	122
Assumptions Underlying Heritability Studies in General	124
<i>Are Relatives' Personalities Really Measured Independently?</i>	124
<i>Is There Really No Assortative Mating for Personality?</i>	127
Assumptions Underlying Twin-Based Heritability Studies in Particular	128
<i>Are Twins' Early Environments Really Separate?</i>	128
<i>Are Twins' Adoptive Households Really Very Different?</i>	129
<i>Are Identical Twins Really Treated Differently by Others?</i>	131
Effects of the Unique Environment on Personality? Parental Treatment, Peer Groups, and Birth Order	132
<i>Parental Treatment and Peer Groups</i>	132
<i>Birth Order</i>	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

<i>Genotype–Environment Interactions</i>	135
<i>Genotype–Environment Correlations: Passive, Reactive, and Active</i>	137

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
<i>Several Reasons Why Variation Does Not Go Away</i>	144
<i>Fluctuating Optimum: Ideal Levels of a Characteristic Vary across Places and Times</i>	145
<i>Frequency Dependence: The Advantages of Doing What Others Are Not Doing</i>	146
<i>The Operation of the Fluctuating Optimum and Frequency Dependence: Genetic and Developmental Routes</i>	147
Adaptive Trade-offs between High and Low Levels of the HEXACO Personality Factors	148
<i>Honesty–Humility</i>	148
<i>Agreeableness</i>	149
<i>Emotionality</i>	149
<i>Summary for Honesty–Humility, Agreeableness, and Emotionality: Altruism versus Aggression</i>	150
BOX 7-1: Sex Differences in Personality Traits: The Emotionality Factor	151
<i>Extraversion</i>	151
<i>Conscientiousness</i>	151
<i>Openness to Experience</i>	152
<i>Summary for Extraversion, Conscientiousness, and Openness to Experience: Engagement in Areas of Endeavor</i>	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
<i>Honesty–Humility and Agreeableness</i>	153
<i>Emotionality</i>	156
<i>Extraversion</i>	157
<i>Conscientiousness</i>	158
<i>Openness to Experience</i>	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
<i>Schizoid</i>	165
<i>Schizotypal</i>	165
<i>Paranoid</i>	166
<i>Antisocial</i>	166
<i>Borderline</i>	166
<i>Histrionic</i>	167
<i>Narcissistic</i>	167
<i>Avoidant</i>	167
<i>Dependent</i>	167
<i>Obsessive-Compulsive</i>	168
Classifying the DSM-IV Personality Disorders: Clusters A, B, and C	168
Disorders Considered for Inclusion in DSM-IV but Rejected	169
<i>Depressive</i>	169
<i>Passive-Aggressive (Negativistic)</i>	170
<i>Self-Defeating</i>	170
<i>Sadistic</i>	170
Other Personality-Related Disorders Not Included as DSM-IV Personality Disorders	171
<i>Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder</i>	171
<i>Separation Anxiety Disorder</i>	172
<i>Oppositional Defiant Disorder</i>	172
<i>Specific Phobias</i>	173
<i>Summary</i>	174
Problems with the Concept of Personality Disorders	174
Alternative Systems for Personality Disorder Diagnosis	176
Origins of Personality Disorders: Development, Biological Bases, Hereditry 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
<i>Are Spouses Similar in Personality?</i>	182
<i>Marital Satisfaction</i>	183
<i>Attachment Styles</i>	185
<i>Parenting Styles</i>	186
Peer Relationships: Friendships and Status	186
Health-Related Outcomes	187
<i>Substance Use</i>	188

<i>Longevity</i>	189	
<i>Heart Disease (and “Type A” Personality)</i>		192
Academic Performance	193	
Job Performance	194	
<i>How to Assess Job Performance?</i>	195	
<i>The Role of Conscientiousness</i>	195	
<i>Specific Traits: The Case of Proactivity</i>		196
<i>Integrity Tests</i>	197	
<i>The Problem of Faking</i>	198	
BOX 9-1: Personality and Occupational Choice		199
Law-Abidingness versus Criminality	200	
<i>The Role of Self-Control</i>	200	
<i>Primary and Secondary Psychopathy</i>	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
<i>Spearman and the g Factor</i>	214	
<i>Thurstone and Group Factors</i>	217	
<i>g Plus Group Factors</i>	218	
Developmental Change and Stability in Mental Abilities		220
<i>Developmental Changes in Mean Levels of Mental Ability</i>		220
<i>Stability of Mental Ability across the Life Span</i>		221
Biological Bases of Mental Ability	222	
<i>Brain Size</i>	222	
<i>Nerve Conduction Velocity</i>	223	
<i>Reaction Time</i>	224	
<i>Inspection Time</i>	226	
<i>Brain Waves: Averaged Evoked Potentials</i>	227	
<i>Brain Glucose Metabolism</i>	228	
Genetic and Environmental Influences on Mental Ability		228
<i>Genetic Influences</i>	228	
<i>Womb Environment Influences</i>	230	
<i>Other Environmental Influences: Nutrition</i>	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	
<i>Academic Achievement and Performance</i>	237	
<i>Job Performance, Occupational Status, and Income</i>		240

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

Chapter 11: Religion and Politics

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

Chapter 12: Sexuality

Major Dimensions of Sexuality	285
Sexuality and Personality	287

<i>Sexual Arousal and Personality</i>	287	
<i>Sexual Commitment and Personality</i>	288	
<i>Sexual Orientation and Personality</i>	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
<i>Genetic and Environmental Influences</i>	294	
<i>Biological Bases</i>	294	
<i>Evolutionary Function</i>	295	
Sexual Orientation	297	
<i>Genetic and Environmental Influences and Biological Bases</i>	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
<i>Evolutionary Function</i>	301	
BOX 12-3: The Evolution of Sex Differences in Vocational Interests?	302	
Sexual Arousal	302	
<i>Genetic and Environmental Influences</i>	302	
<i>Biological Bases</i>	303	
<i>Evolutionary Function</i>	303	
Summary and Conclusions	304	
 Conclusion		
What We Have Learned So Far	305	
What We Have Yet to Learn	309	
Final Remarks	311	
 <i>References</i>	 313	
<i>Index</i>	331	

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Preface

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.

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

The Study of Personality

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!